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by Elton Webster

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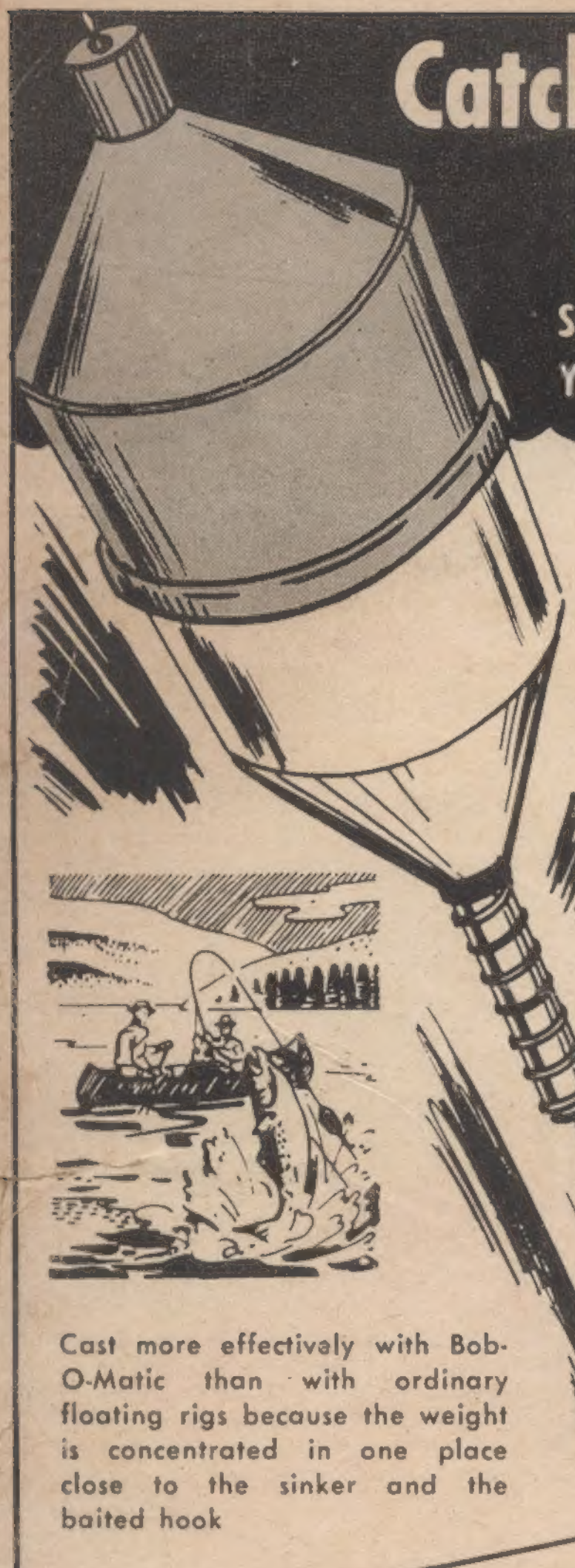

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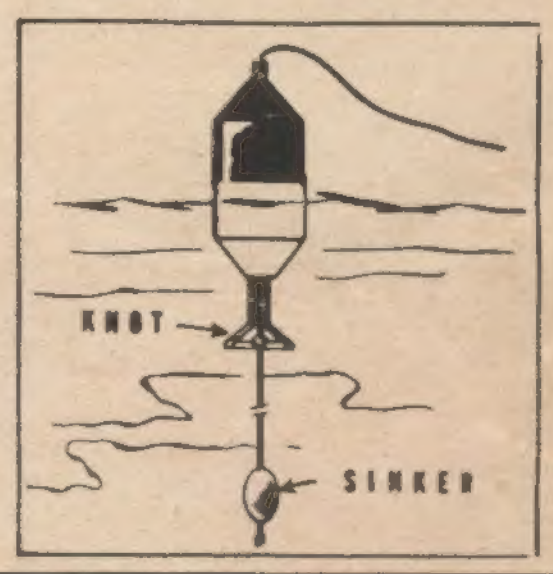




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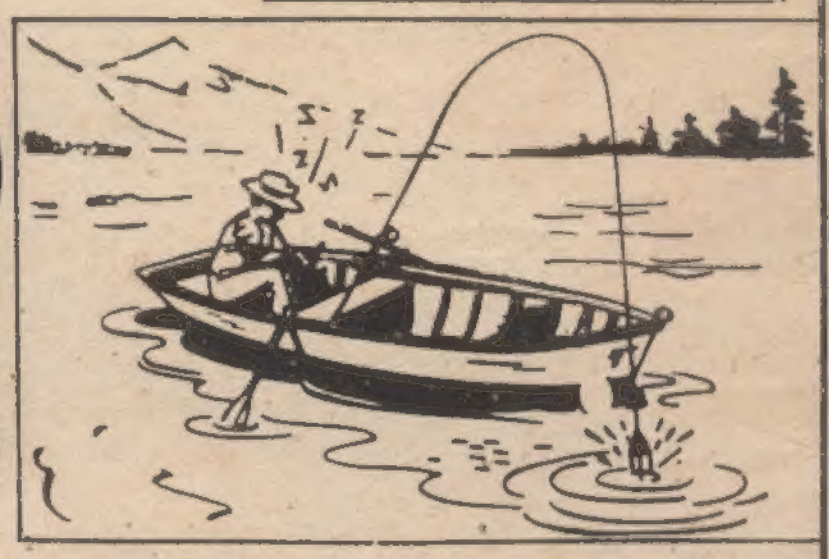

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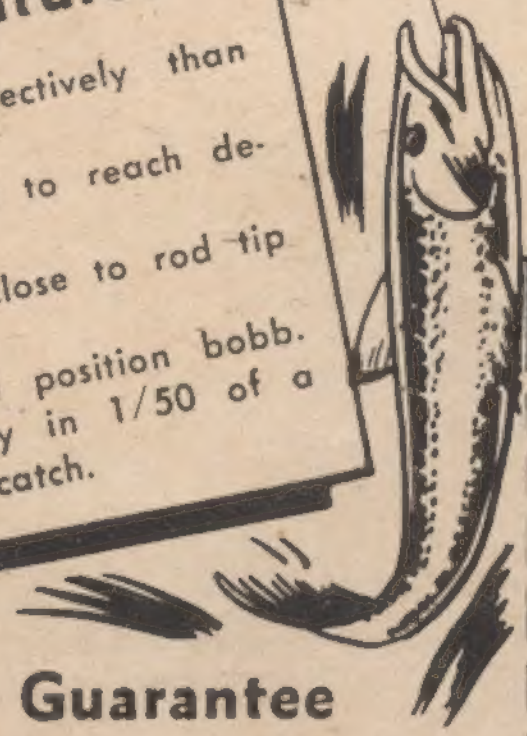

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ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.*

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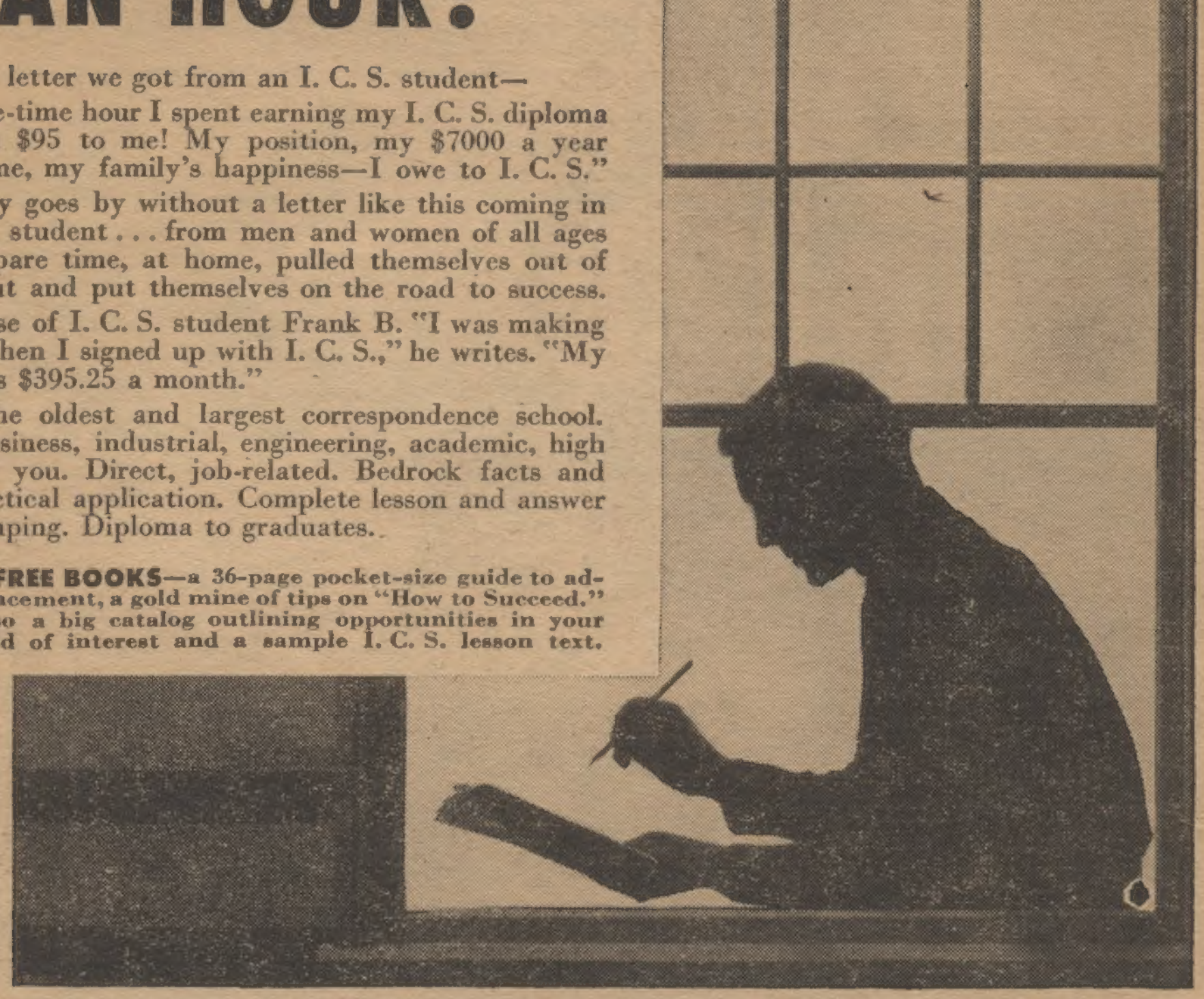

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# ORGANIZED OWLHOOTS

by Leonard Calhoun

GOOD ORGANIZATION has always paid big dividends, not only in business, but in crime and in detection, too. One of the toughest cop-and-robber battles of the Old West was fought out between the first really organized outlaw band, and the first really organized law enforcement agency. And even after Dave Cook's Rocky Mountain Association rounded up L. H. Musgrove and his leading lieutenants, the fight wasn't over.

After months of careful tracking, Musgrove was in jail in Denver, and Ed Franklin, his right-hand man, imprisoned at Fort Saunders. Musgrove was awaiting trial in January, two months away, and seemed to take the whole matter pretty lightly. He made no pretense of believing that his gang would let him stay in jail till trial time, but waited, without any apparent impatience, for someone to make a jail break and get him out.

As for Franklin, he was desperately ill from loss of blood during his desperate last stand, or so the authorities at the Fort thought... until they woke one day to find him gone. The guard

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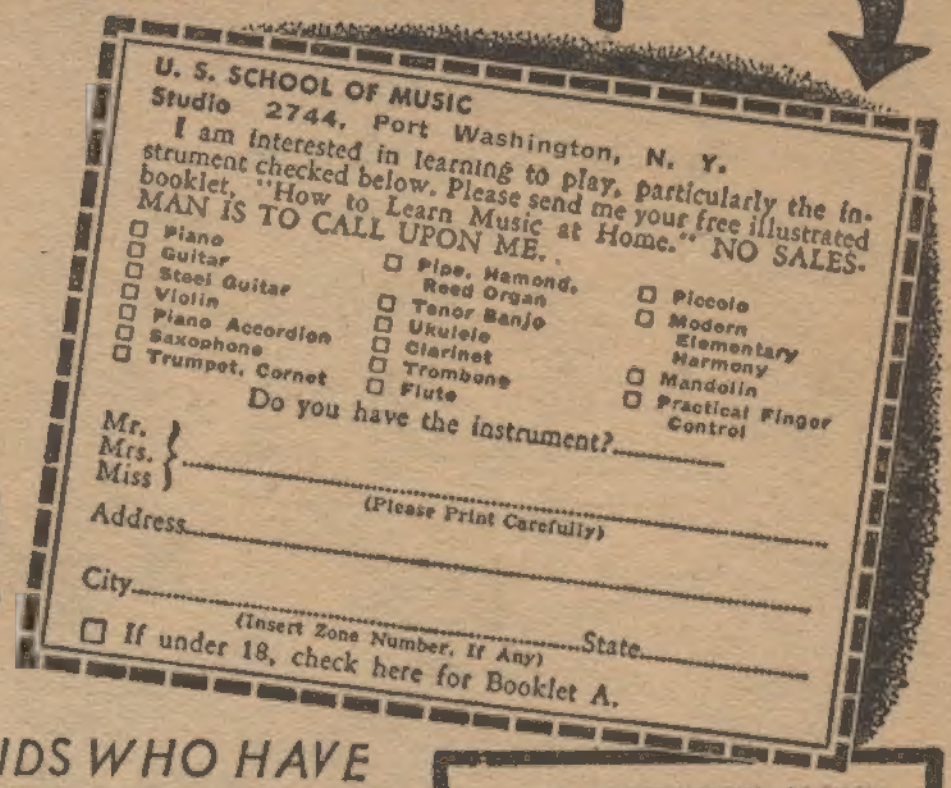


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**Now Plays at Church**

"I had tried several times to start music lessons. I had been depending on a teacher before. Now I play at church, etc."—**Mrs. P. J. Tatman, Sycamore, Illinois.**

# Organized Owlhoots

(*continued from page 5*)

had been less cautious than he might have been, in the belief that the "sick" man was barely able to move.

There was little doubt about Franklin's destination. For weeks, members of the Musgrove band had been gathering in Denver. The law officers there knew that a prison break was brewing, but there was nothing they could do. The best-known criminals cannot be arrested as long as they behave themselves, and Musgrove's boys might have been in the finest Sunday School set, the way they were acting. Denver officials looked on impotently, while the forces gathered. When the news of Ed Franklin's departure from his enforced sickbed at Fort Saunders came through, Cook and his men became even more worried. Still, there was nothing to do but stay alert and wait for trouble.

It came soon enough.

Orson Brooks was a respected Denver Judge. When he was held up mysteriously in the dark one evening, the citizenry would have been sufficiently outraged, even if he had failed to recognize the bandits. But when Judge Brooks reported that he had recognized one of the men as Sanford Duggan, a desperado who had been driven out of Denver after an attack on a dancehall girl, it caused a small sensation. When, on top of that, the Judge described the other man as tall, husky, and dark, with a sharp-nosed, beetle-browed countenance, and a slanting scar on one cheek, Dave Cook knew that Ed Franklin had hit town. Apparently the two outlaws had come in together, and were too short of cash to obey the good-behavior rules the other bandits were following.

AS THE NEWS leaked out of the law headquarters, the town rose to a fever pitch of excitement and anger. The feeling had been growing for some time anyhow, while the outlaws poured in from all over. Everybody knew there was going to be some sort of attempt to free Musgrove, and everyone was determined not to let him get away.

Things got too hot for Duggan and Franklin. The holdup had occurred Friday evening. By Sunday morning, it was well known that the two of them had left town. Sheriffs in all the neighboring towns were notified to be on the lookout for them; and late Sunday afternoon, news came in from John Keith, the Sheriff at Golden, that a couple of men who seemed to fit the description had been drinking there since the evening before. The final identification had been made when one of them cashed a torn twenty, mended as the Judge had informed the police a bill of his was mended

A posse left Denver immediately, and made the eighteen miles to Golden by nine o'clock that night. They arrived to discover that Franklin had drunk himself out of the picture; he was at the local hotel, fast asleep. Duggan was still going strong, however. He was at Dan Hill's saloon, having his last few before the place closed up for the night.

By the time the posse reached the saloon, the lights were already out. The place was closed, but Duggan, who had seen the horsemen coming, had gone back with Miles Hill, the saloonkeeper's brother, to get his gun.

The posse of lawmen surrounded the two men in a back room of the bar. Duggan opened fire from inside. The outlaws had a small advantage, in that the lawmen were more clearly

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# THE WIDE LOOPERS

## NOVEL OF SATAN'S RANGE

by Elton Webster

**Malicious mischief was afoot on this range, and Nick Janos and Denver Bryan found themselves on the wrong side. But skulduggery can be worked more ways than one, and Janos knew more tricks than the owner of the Box X. Only the tricky partners stood to get their skulls ventilated by both sides if they were caught...**

THE LITTLE man on the twelve-hand roan rode out of the dried thistle, sneezing, weeping, and cursing. His rather bedraggled Angora chaps had been molting for a year anyway, and now they were full of prickles.

"Dawgone such a country!" he wailed, then sneezed a last time, wiping his eyes and nose on a blue bandana. "The thistles grow saddle high, and the grass ain't tall enough to tickle the belly of a mudworm!"

His larger companion, aboard a dappled gray horse of fifteen hands height, that looked as though it had some racing blood in its veins, glanced up smiling from the Texas brand book he was studying.

"That's said to be the most nourishing grass in the whole cow country, Denver," he responded. "And the critters here look pretty hefty, don't they?"

"Oh yeah, but why not?" asked Denver Bryan sourly. "They been bred-up, you can see that. And then, winters they don't have to buy hay, like we do in Montana. Dammit, I never thought I'd go for shotgun chaps like yourn, Nick. But fust money I get, these damn burr-traps of mine get burnt!"

"They was on their way to the scrap-heap afore we left the Bad Lands last fall, a year ago," said the big man mildly. "An' we been through plenty since then."

"Git!" snapped Patsy Keane. "If I should tell them what you said to me, they'd hang you to the nearest tree, half-breed!"

"Yeah—and now this!" sighed Denver obscurely. "I've heard tell of these Texas hellions, Nick. What chance d'you reckon a couple mild little fellers from Montana'll have? If that jigger hadn't of been your uncle... How 'bout the makin's, pardner?"

NICK JANOS shook his head, and sighed. "I threw 'em away," he said. "Officially we're outa grub, outa tobacco—and lookin' for a job. Remember that."

"Aw hell," mourned Bryan. "I won't have no trouble rememberin', long as I can't smoke. "And me with a thousand-dollar bill in my left bootheel!"

"I'm fixed the same," smiled Nick. "But we forget that too—for the time being. We couldn't buy anything with 'em anyhow, unless we changed 'em at a bank. That's why I cashed that reward check thataway."

"Aw-w all right," fussed Bryan, spitting dryly at the browned September grass. "I hope we raise a round-up soon, though, and they want a coupla center-fire tophands."

Their walking horses started to splash through a series of muddy pools in the bottom of what usually was a fair-sized creek. Janos reined, and motioned for his companion to let his animal drink also.

"Wonder what creek this one is," mused Denver.

"Either the Black or Squaw, the way I reckon it. They must of had a

whole month or more of hot, dry weather, to gaunt it down this much, though."

"Probably more like six months," guessed Denver. "I've heard tell that some places in the south here it don't rain more'n once a year." As his pony finished drinking, he neck-reined it on to the further bank, and continued the interminable journey.

Fifteen minutes later, Nick Janos flung out a long arm to halt his companion. "Lookit!" he bade tersely.

Perhaps five hundred yards ahead of them a closing fan of four or five punchers were hazing a bunch of cattle down into a long, shallow coulee. There was no sign of round-up camp or chuck wagon.

"Huh, wonder why they're putting 'em down there?"

"The's only one likely answer—rustling," rejoined Nick grimly. "C'mon back out of sight. They ain't our cows, and it might be sort of uncomfortable if they saw us. . ."

But the precaution came too late. The riders had spied them, stopped to stare inimically. Then one left the group and rode in their direction. He beckoned backward, and a second man spurred out of the hanging dust of the cattle drive, to join him.

Denver Bryan made a satisfied sound, and grinned at his companion. "They ain't Texas rangers, anyway. They send two," he chuckled. His right hand, like that of the taller man, stayed near the butt of his bone-handled Colt, however.

The two newcomers reined. They were mounted on excellent horses that looked fresh, had good outfits, and carried Winchester carbines in the boots under the saddle fenders. Both men were at that stage of non-shaving, with facial hair a half-inch long, which means absence from town or home ranch for some days or perhaps weeks.

The obvious leader was the one on the chestnut horse, a burly, coarse-featured fellow with washed-out gray-blue eyes now rimmed with red. He looked the part of authority, and also of bad temper. The man with him was probably part Mexican, part Yaqui and the rest any sort of white you wanted to imagine. He was brown-eyed, accipitrine of beak, narrow of jaw, with yellow teeth very crookedly overlapping each other, and wore ancient plush pants, a black cotton shirt buttoned high in the neck, an unconcealed, crude-looking armpit sheath for his big hand-gun, and silver conchas on an expensive, hard-carved Miles City saddle one look at which aroused Bryan's covetous instincts. The half-breed's horse was a wiry, vicious black.

The burly man took his time about speaking. His half-slitted, pale eyes seemed to inventory every meager detail of the two waddies' outfits. The half-empty cantinas, the single-rig saddles—both cheap in the beginning, and showing the wood through the worn and scuffed leather now—and the gaunt look of their horses seemed to interest him most.

"Strangers thisaway?" he queried, the soft Texas drawl somehow nullified by a sneering edge to the words.

"Yep," replied Nick. "Dakotas. Lookin' for a range where it don't blizz six months of the year."

"Well, you're there," said the burly man. "We have northers, an' it gits cold—clear down to freezin' sometimes. But nothin' like the thirty b'low zero of Dakota. Want work?"

THE FINAL two words were abrupt. They brought back swift pictures, to the minds of both newcomers, of that bunch of cattle being hazed down into the coulee. Take a job with rustlers? Well-ll, a tobacco-hungry side glance from Denver seemed to decide the mind of Nick Janos.

"Maybe," he said. "We ain't grubline, exactly—but we need a job. Out of tobacco, for one thing."

"Huh. Well, this is the Box X spread. Used to b'long to a feller

named Breck Wilson. Now it's develo-pin'. Pays top wages. An' the's always a kaig of forty-rodin the mess wagon, with a one-slug rule on her. But the slugs is gen'rous."

Bryan breathed an audible sigh. "I'd know what t' do with a snifter of red-eye, pardner," he said wistfully. "Likewise a sack of durham and some papers. . .what say, Nick?"

"I feel same way," nodded the tall man. "Reckon you've hired yourself a couple of hands, Mister."

"Crack down! Ride thataway. . ." and he flung out an arm. "The wagon's camped in a clump of cottonwoods jest across the first wide draw y' come to. Tell the cook I said y' c'd draw tobacco an' anything else y' need right now, against wages. He'll feed yuh an' give the slug apiece to stop your thirst."

"Alicran here an' me, we gotta ketch up with them dogies we're shovin' 'cross the creek. We're 'bout finished workin' the main herd, but these-here are some nester cattle that them damn scissor-bills throwed on our range. Damn the idee of lettin' such critters live! She ain't the man's country she used to be.

"But you boys fog along. You're on the payroll now, but your work don't start till sun-up tomorrow. You look like a chanct to rest wouldn't go so bad. See you later. So long. C'mon, Alicran. . ."

The two whirled their ponies, and started back the way they had come. Neither actually turned to watch Janos and Bryan, but the half-breed seemed to find occasion to turn his nag sidewise three or four times, and doubtless cast glances back from the corners of his black eyes.

Denver Bryan started his pony forward in the indicated direction, anxious to reach the mess wagon and the tobacco. The little man took a drink now and then, and doubtless would enjoy this one, but he was an inveterate smoker. The lack of tobacco for a mere matter of four hours had been a hardship to him.

"You got that okay, pardner?" came Nick Janos' inquiring voice from behind—a voice modulated so it could not possibly carry to the cattle-hazers by any freak of wind. "This is Breck Wilson's Box X. I got Black Creek, all right. That big jigger's boss—so he must be Tolman Ghee. Reckon he read our brands, and knows we're from Montana instead of Dakota?"

" 'Tain't nowise likely. He quit the Misery Ridge country before we came there. There ain't no reason to think he takes any home paper—there not being any for a hundred miles. So-o, barring accidents, like finding one of the boys sheriff-dodgin', we ought to get away with it.

"C'mon fella, let's rattle our hocks and find that mess wagon. My lungs are aching something fierce, for some more nicotine contammy-nation!"

## - 2 -

THE ROPE corral looked something like a misting fountain, from a quarter-mile distance. Nothing but the fog of dust could be seen, eternally rising from the hoofs of 150 ponies of all sorts, milling about inside the temporary enclosure.

But actually in the corral the visibility was better, even now in the dim light of dawn of the morning following the arrival of Denver Bryan and Nick Janos. In the center of the corral stood a half-dozen yawning, stretching punchers, their loops spread, rubbing their sleepy eyes and staring through the dust at the dim shapes of the milling horses of the remuda.

To anyone uninitiated, it would have seemed quite impossible that the waiting waddies could tell one dusty animal

from another, and thus pick out the ones chosen for his personal string. But as the ponies milled this way and that, one after another of the men moved into action with his rope, unerringly picking the horse he wanted.

Denver and Nick were waiting for mounts to be assigned. Now their turns came.

"You choose that one f'r top-circle hoss," said Ghee, curtly indicating a hammerheaded sorrel to Nick Janos. "Toss a line on him."

Nick nodded. He had been holding his loop across his right shoulder, and now shifted slightly for action. The sorrel ducked his head, and was lost among the other animals for a space of seconds. Then he emerged again a few feet to their left. Janos' rope shot out, settled about the sorrel's neck, and went taut as the tall man braced himself.

But the sorrel was not a bit reluctant. As he felt the pull of the rope he stopped, turned, and then came mincingly and full of curiosity to the man who had snared him. Nick moved with that slow, easily confident manner of men who know horse nature. He reached up and slipped the loop behind the sorrel's ears. The animal, still looking over this stranger as if questioning his ability to ride, followed Nick out of the corral without even taking up the slack of rope.

"That claybank yonder's your meat, li'l fella—lessn he's too much f'r your size," indicated Ghee, jerking a thumb at a wicked-looking fourteen-hand yellow-white animal with distended nostrils and rolling eyes.

"I ride giraffes or anything," responded Denver. "If a pony swallows his head some, that just makes it more fun."

"Well, try Popo," said Ghee sneeringly. "He ain't real bad, but he's been known to buck some, gentleman-like."

As he spoke, Denver half turned away. His rope flipped back in a short upward fling, and then the claybank, not at all tractable as had been the sorrel, was dragging the little man about the corral, Bryan's high heels scouring into the hard-packed gumbo.

Ghee himself lent a hand, and the combined weight of the two men brought the claybank to a whistling, quivering halt on stiff legs.

Recognizing a bad horse, Denver approached warily. He chuckled dryly as he was missed closely by a pair of flying fore feet. Denver went on unmoved, except for a harder look of determination about the muscles of his wide mouth. He was being offered a test, and knew it.

Ghee, helping on the rope, grinned. It had been weeks since a rope had touched the claybank, and thus far none of the Box X men had succeeded in riding him without being thrown.

"Still ridin' gy-raffes, li'l fella?" gibed Ghee, making Denver grimace with rising temper.

"If you mean me, my name's Sean Bryan—Denver if you like, mister," he rasped. "And I'm still ready to ride anything—men included. That goes both ways for the one-eyed jacks!"

He crouched slightly, one hand creeping toward his gun.

Ghee looked slightly puzzled by the challenge, but still amused. "Meanin' what, Denver?"

"Huh. Even you got enough savvy for that. And what you think ain't so damn far wrong!"

"That's brash talk, stranger," said Ghee, his smile fading, and one hand hooking in his belt above his holstered gun.

IT WAS ALICRAN the half-breed who broke the tension. "Val-game dios," he chortled, "why keel a man who is going to ride El Popo? Let us see what happen. Long time El Popo ain't been ridden. . .he is the volcano, savvy? El Popocatapetl? I will watch this show, me." His criss-crossed yellow teeth showed in an anticipatory grin.

Nick Janos, unseen by either Denver or his baiters, had slipped back through the corral dust, to stand waiting with his hands on the butt of his triggerless .44 Colt. Now he dropped the hand away, and as Denver and Alicran led the claybank outside, Nick was reaching under the belly of his chosen animal for the flank cinch. He had left his worn-out single-rig hull at the mess wagon, and borrowed one of the Texas kecks for the time being. That old wood saddle had just been part of the masquerade, anyhow, and had been decidedly uncomfortable.

"They give you the ranch outlaw?" Nick grinned.

"Looks thataway," Denver nodded. He turned to Alicran. "Me'n Nick will handle this greaseball now, fella."

"Si," nodded the half-breed, and then queerly spoke from the side of his mouth without moving his lips. "Watch the cutbank. Thees hoss has kill one man. An' also...watch de boss! You play it malo in the corral —an' Ghee, he has four notch on de gun. He don't notch for Injuns, either!"

Alicran, his high cheekboned face retaining its blank look, went back to the corral to catch up his own horse, and the two partners were left together.

"Of all the blinketty-blank, dog-eared, bonedomed buffleheads, you are the dangest!" gritted Janos. "Want to spoil everything? I can't ride herd on you all the time, the way I did last night when that-there dipper of red-eye on an empty stomach got you runnin' off at the mouth! You know what brought us here. Likewise, you oughta know we're buckin' ten-to-one odds if we start anything on this spread. Next time you start bellowing, I'm going to take you and toss you in the creek—and I'll pick a muddy spot, not a waterhole!"

Denver grinned shamefacedly. "Aw-w, dry up, you dang six-foot-six string bean," he said crustily. "I know I was talking outa turn, but if you was five-foot-six and weighed 130 instead of 210, you'd get a mad up easier, too. When them big hunks o' lard start ridin' me, I just—oh hell, I'm sorry if I spilled the beans."

"I understand, pardner," said Nick, more softly. "Yep, I savvy. Reckon I'd be the same way. But—look out! You got a bad one here."

Denver nodded. He had dodged just in time to avoid the snapping teeth of the claybank, aimed at his biceps.

"Want to hobble the stirrups?" suggested Nick.

"Naw. Hobble nothin'. Just shoo him off the cut banks the breed mentioned, when I get going. I'll ride him straight up."

The Box X boss and his men were in the saddle, waiting impatiently as the little man made ready to mount.

"Any bets he stays more'n five jumps?" jeered Ghee.

"Me'n Denver are plumb broke or we'd call you," answered Nick easily. "But it won't take ten seconds before you're glad we didn't have rolls handy. Fork him, Denver!"

Bryan eased into the saddle, and got the right stirrup. Nick slacked the foot rope as the rider jerked away the blindfold. The claybank stood motionless, head slowly sinking toward his legs, then suddenly leaped like a tiger as Denver jabbed him with the blunted rowels.

El Popo was a bawler, a snorter, a horse that went tearing mad and tried to bite his rider every few seconds—and failing a knee or an arm in reach of his bared teeth, often bit his own shoulder.

Now pitching, bawling, turning jerkily to bite, he went into his repertoire. Denver Bryan, riding with slack reins, sat easily in the saddle, fanning the bronc with his Stetson. A yell came from the assembled cowpunchers. They saw at once this was going to be a rodeo ride, or a quick tumble. And every jack of them at one time or an-

other had tried to fork the volcano horse, to his sorrow.

Weaving, twisting, the claybank sunfished and landed limber. Denver loosened up, expecting a roll on the ground, and Janos, coming along close behind, caught his breath sharply when the claybank, instead of following conventional procedure, arched up like a skyrocket.

BUT WITHOUT seeming the least perturbed, Denver got the lost stirrup, and did not miss a single fanning blow with his hat.

"Swell stuff, pardner!" yelled Nick Janos admiringly. There was even a murmur from the men of the Box X, who obviously had come expecting a disaster rather than a nervy and capable exhibition of riding.

Up again went El Popo, this time to land at an angle to the ground. His knees buckled, and over he went in a swirl of dust. Guided by that sixth sense without which superlative riders simply aren't made, Denver Bryan had loosened his feet in the stirrups. He hit running, and as the claybank bawled and scrambled up again Denver took a three-step run and vaulted back into the saddle.

This time there was a choked off, involuntary cheer from the Box X crowd.

"Glad you ain't betting, boss?" yelled Nick.

Ghee said nothing. But his heavy jaw jutted forward half an inch further than usual, making him look like a man-ape.

Suddenly the claybank fought the reins, hauling his head down and forward. Then he gave over pitching, and ran with all his speed away from the watchers—and straight toward the cut-bank against which he had crippled two former ambitious riders.

With a yell, Nick rode to intercept, but in spite of real speed in the animal under him, the maniac outlaw had that added something which frenzy lends to all creatures, and gained foot after foot of space. Bryan still sat straight up, but was sawing on the reins now, grimly realizing that he had been given a plain bar bit—and that the cold-jawed outlaw had seized it in his teeth, clamping it with jaw muscles beside which the iron biceps and triceps of a man's arms were puny things indeed.

Giving over the try to halt the claybank completely, Denver tried to turn him. He hauled back on the right rein with all his weight and strength. The horse held its head down and paid no attention. One final jerk—and the rein snapped! Denver was helpless now, and the claybank, slavering and throwing up flecks of foam, was less than eighty feet from the death trap of the cut bank. There was not a chance in the world of Nick Janos, or any of the other riders behind, getting in front and keeping the maddened animal from crashing over.

But unnoted by any, a big dappled gray horse with a bareheaded rider had suddenly come from a coulee at the side, and sprung into a tight run at an angle. There was scarcely a whole second to spare. Coming together almost at right angles, the dappled gray met the crazed claybank shoulder to shoulder with a sickening crash.

The gray went to his knees, but then staggered up again, rider still in place. But he slid down the same instant, and ran three steps to sit on the claybank's head and help subdue him.

Denver Bryan, white about the mouth corners and bleeding profusely from the nostrils and from a cut above his right eyebrow, scrambled back from where he had been thrown head-first by the terrific impact.

"Thanks, stranger!" he greeted hoarsely. "You saved me something I ain't forgettin'."

That was when Nick arrived, sliding to the ground in a swirl of dust,

and then proceeding to examine the little man for injuries.

"We're—for you, mister—me and my pard," said Janos.

"Please don't show it—right now," said the yellow-haired man almost inaudibly, as he arose and went to his gray mount again. His smile faded, and his body seemed to grow tense as he faced the Box X boss and the men who just had arrived.

Some of the punchers grinned and nodded appreciatively at Bryan, but Ghee himself went straight up to the gray horse and its bareheaded rider. The Box X boss looked furious.

"Kinda askin' f'r trouble, comin' here, ain't yuh, Lawson?" came the grating demand. "Trouble's one thing we furnishes free, too..."

"Somebody shoved a jag of my cows across the creek," stated the yellow-head evenly. "I came to get 'em back where they belong. That's what our agreement said, wasn't it?"

"AGREEMENT, hell! You damn nesters oughta be burnt out an' chased f'm hell to breakfast!" snarled Ghee. "You was to keep your cow-critters outa this range, not inta an' outa an' so on! Ifn they got here at low water like now, we was to chase 'em back pronto. You wasn't to come on Box X range!"

"That isn't the interpretation Judge Kleiber put on it. I had him read the agreement," said Lawson quietly.

"T' hell with Big Horn Kleiber! What the hell's a Federal judge got to do with cow business here?" yelled Ghee, obviously working himself up to a killing fury.

"Let me call your attention to two things—if you're planning murder," said Lawson coldly, almost contemptuously. "First, I'm unarmed. Never carry a gun. I have made affidavit to that effect with Sheriff Yates. Second, right now two witnesses are watching you through binoculars..." and he nodded back toward a low eminence, whereon two riders sat horses, watching. "You see, Ghee, I know quite well it was your men or yourself, who put my cattle across the creek. And I know you are just hankering for a chance to murder me. But if you do, you'll hang."

"Damn your two witnesses. I got a dozen!" exploded Ghee, sweeping his arm toward the men of the Box X. "You git now, or..."

He slapped a palm on the butt of his six-gun, but did not draw. Over at one side Denver Bryan silently came up with his own gun, unseen by the actors of this neighborhood drama; but Nick Janos, beside the little man, caught his arm and forced the gun down to holster.

"Well, I'm saying just this. One of those two back there on the hill across the creek, is Snow-at-Sundown—Mrs. Sack Sanders. Against her testimony in court at Lamar, all the perjury of your hired men wouldn't travel a foot, Ghee. Better think it over."

INVOLUNTARILY all eyes turned for closer scrutiny of the tiny figures of the watchers, though at this distance the naked eye did not reveal details. But all those present, save Janos and Bryan knew the Indian girl at least by sight. She was a prodigy of Mission School and university, and for several years had been the acknowledged beauty of the Panhandle range. Her father, Little Smoke, was wealthy. So when finally Snow-at-Sundown, chose a white cowboy husband, making him join the Piegan tribe before marriage, Little Smoke had set up the two with a fine ranch-house, water rights, a herd of cattle and a number of the finest horses to be found between the Colorado line and the Rio Grande. Though mixed marriages and squaw men usually came in for contumely, Sack Sanders in this case was envied by practically every able-bodied male of the short-grass country. And his

lovely wife, easily the superior in looks and education of most ranch women, was known admiringly as a "dinger"—in the slang of that day.

The identity of the other binocular watcher was not then revealed. Nick and Denver surmised it was a smallish man, possibly a young brother of the yellow-haired Lawson. The latter rode away from the angry Box X boss, straight through the puddles of the creek, and joined the pair who came down from the vantage point and rode out of sight with Lawson.

Tolman Ghee was boiling. He cursed spasmodically for minutes. Then Nick and Denver overheard what was probably thought to be a soliloquy, but which carried plainly to others—and to which the breed called Alicran had a cautioning reply.

"Damn that nosin'-in Snow-at-Sundown!" grated Ghee. "I'll git that yellowbelly who's hidin' behind her skirts, an' I'll git him good. Likewise that water-stealin', land-grabbin' gal is goin' to wisht to hell she'd treated Toll Ghee better when she had the chance..."

Even Nick and Denver looked puzzledly at each other. These words applied to some young woman, but they could not guess her identity. It seemed unlikely that an Indian girl could do any water stealing or land grabbing, so it must be another who also had a hook-up with yellowhead Lawson...

"Sh-h, boss, not so loud!" Alicran was cautioning. "No matter what you do, don' talk 'bout it. De men, dey ain't so wild about makin' fight on women..."

Then the two, walking their horses rode out of earshot of Denver Bryan and Nick Janos. Denver still held the claybank on the ground, a captive. He busied himself now with a bridle rein repair.

"What are you doing?" asked Nick, frowning.

"Getting ready to finish my ride."

"Aw-w now, that ain't reasonable. You showed them you could do it, so why take chances? 'Never a peeler that never was throwed, never a bronc that never was rode.'"

"Huh," said Denver. "Popo here ain't ever had that done to him yet. But right now he does. I aim to make a cow hoss or a ghost out of him afore I'm through today!"

Nick shrugged. He knew the bulldog determination of his comrade. So when all was ready they went through all the blindfold and fore-foot-looping again, as Denver took the saddle. But this time the flurry of recalcitrance on the part of El Popo was short-lived. At least for this day, the heavy fall he had taken had pounded out of him most of his desire to kill a man. Doubtless it would return more than once and in some measure, steadily lessening. But every time he would find himself flayed mercilessly by a master, until the temper oozed out of him and he became tractable, if not ever gentled.

## - 3 -

IT TAKES more than one spectacular ride to halt a roundup, however. When Denver Bryan finally came into camp astride the subdued claybank, he got some brief admiring and congratulatory words from the waddies, but the business of the day already had got into full swing. Even Ghee appeared to have forgotten all about the rencontre of the earlier morning. He was crustily good-humored—on the surface.

"Great ride!" he bellowed heartily to Denver. "Didn't s'pose they growed riders like you in the North! Go get yourself an extry slug at the wagon, li'l man. An' no offense!"

Denver was glad enough of a short

drink after his long ordeal, for his knees trembled now against the horse's sides with a sort of weakness due to nervous let-down. But Denver was not fooling himself any concerning the Box X boss. He and Nick Janos had made themselves an implacable, deadly enemy. He roped himself another mount, since as yet El Popo could not be depended on in any of the "tights" of a round-up, and turned the claybank into the rope corral. It was all too plain what the rider must have gone through, when the lard-colored animal, head hanging, went over to a corner of the ropes, stood there shivering and distressed looking a few minutes, and then lay down on the bare ground.

When Nick and Denver came, ready for work, the final group of riders was being sent forth by Ghee. The two new hands went along. The indicated circle was a long one, but being green to the range, they were dropped first.

"Comb that draw," Ghee directed them. "Watch the breaks to north of the creek. The's some ringtailed wild ones in the brush that ain't never been branded. One blue maverick mebbe you'll come acrost. But hell, you jiggers know what t' do. Take your time, 'cause we won't be in with the last drives afore dark. Watch out special for any stuff wearin' the Hourglass iron."

"Hourglass?" echoed Janos. For a private reason he had studied the Texas brand book intensively, yet he did not recall this one. The book, however, had been published some five years earlier, and it was possible, even likely, that the Hourglass had been registered since that time.

"Yeah. On the right ribs. B'longs to that yaller-haired tenderfoot who lives acrost the creek."

"This Lawson jigger we seen?"

At this moment Alicran came up and joined Ghee.

"Yeah," said the boss. "We're gatherin' Lawson's stuff f'r him—" and he winked broadly, though without any vestige of humor.

Alicran shook his head slightly. Then Ghee turned to him, said something in Spanish, and the two turned their mounts and rode away. Nick and Denver started down the draw, as ordered.

Denver waited till there was no chance of being overheard. Then he spat disgustedly.

"For the love of sixteen whistlin', whem-grubbin' gruxes!" he exclaimed. "If I didn't know your craw was stuffed with sand, Nick, I'd swear you was scared of this damn big windbag, Ghee! Lawson saves me from plenty, and then we let Ghee crawl his hump like he was a patient cam-mule, or somethin'! Why the hell 'd you stop me throwin' down?"

Janos looked at him seriously. "There was one time, Denver, I was sure you really had normal intelligence," he said. "That was the time in Butte the steam calliope started up at the circus lot, and your bronc throwed you clean through the board sidewalk on your head. You were out of your mind then for three days..."

"Aw-w, quit riding me. I know I ain't a giant intellect, but dammit, I stick by m' friends."

"I know you do, Denver," said Janos more gently. "But last night, while you had aboard that dipper of hooch and was talking high, wide and handsome about how you 'n Mister Hoyle and Mister Canfield got together one rainy night and invented the game of Californy draw poker, I just happened to wander by the back of the other fire where Ghee and this-here funny breed—Alicran, which is Mex for scorpion, and who looks like an Injun, and who talks something like a Frenchy at times—was sitting.

"I came here for a reason you damn well know, Denver, so I don't have to tell you I listened with both ears and a couple of trumpets. I got a good part

of the lowdown, too. I'll tell you now. But first off, I want to say this. Lawson wasn't looking for any scrap. Not then. I got an idea that he'll fight when he's ready, though. He ain't yellow, coming over here without even a bean-shooter on him. But the reason I held your draw right then, was that he asked us not to side with him! Don't you remember?"

"YEAH, I DO. Oh hell, I'm always wrong," said Bryan contritely.

"Oh no," chuckled Nick. "But the time for coming right into the open ain't quite yet. I'm betting there's a lot of finagling put across before that time. But right now the setup is like this, as I get it so far.

"The Box X owns just one section on the creek—the north side. They run their stuff mostly on open range that nobody owns. This Lawson jigger has bought himself a homestead on the other side of the creek, which stream is pretty dry now, as we know. But maybe you don't know why it's so dry right here.

"To the west of the Box X, and for just a couple of acres, maybe, the homestead crosses the creek west of the Box X's usual range. The water rights were bought here—Ghee agreeing at that time, and signing up to allow Lawson and his pardner, a fella named Patsy Keane, to dam the creek, build a reservoir, and use the water for irrigatin' his alfalfa—perviding he lets a certain amount go down the creek from the reservoir in dry season.

"Well, Lawson is doing that—and then some. This being the driest season this part of the range ever saw ever since the War Between the States, anyhow—Lawson's been letting double the specified amount of water through, so the range cattle down here won't die of thirst. Of course that's lowering *his* reservoir pretty fast now, but he's betting on Nature bringing rain, as it always has done in time, and saying that he can't let even Ghee's cows die.

"Does Ghee appreciate that? He does like hell! He's wild that he ever took money to sign any such agreement about a dam. He wants to blow it out. Or he wants to salivate Lawson and that Keane fella. Meanwhile he's trying to keep Lawson completely off this range."

"But if Lawson's cows come?" asked Denver Bryan blankly. "That just means more work for the Box X, don't it?"

Nick chuckled grimly. "Just watch the brands," he advised. "Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm betting Ghee's got plenty reason for not wantin' Lawson around here. Maybe we'll see some dirty work, if we watch. But be careful! Hanging or shooting goes along with cow-stealing on Texas range, same as in Montana. . ."

From then on the job of dislodging cattle from brushy spots, and starting them on the designated way, prevented further conversation for half an hour. And during this time, Bryan made a discovery which had him frowning thoughtfully.

"Take a look here, Nick," he said, indicating a cow and nursing calf he had moved out into the open. The cow lowered her head menacingly as Nick Janos rode up, but he circled, and saw quickly what the other man meant.

"The Hourglass ain't a brand I'd own—not on a range near the Box X," said Denver significantly. "That's plain calf-stealin', an' plumb poor-grade work at that!"

Nick came up, smiling grimly. "A Box X calf still nursing a Hourglass ma-cow," he said musingly. "The calf has been branded Hourglass, then somebody just last night has added the extra strokes with a hot running iron. The brand's fresh, while the old one's healed."

"Well, I ain't standin' for that, not on Lawson!" stated Denver Bryan hotly. "Maybe you ain't sidin' with him, but I am, Box X or no Box X!"

"Just a minute," grinned Nick, som-

berly. "There's a lot of Hourglass stuff getting rebranded. Not only calves," he added. "Did you ever stop to wonder why last night they didn't run the iron on the cow, too? They had to rope her, of course. So why not?

"I'll answer my own question. This cow and calf was put here special so we'd find 'em, Denver."

"Migosh, why?"

"Hmm. I ain't sure, but it looks to me as though a showdown was comin'," said Nick, scratching his bristly chin. "We're supposed to bring in these two. Somebody'll remark out loud about it. And then, if trouble does come, Ghee can lay the blame, if any, on us. We did bring in one prime example, and of bad brandin' at that!"

DENVER had paled a little under his range bronze. To have an accusation of calf-stealing for the Box X, laid against him, when he owed perhaps his life to Lawson of the Hourglass, was just too much for his straight-forward mind to even contemplate.

But Nick did not give him a chance to detonate this time.

"There's something we might do about it, Denver," he suggested quietly. "That is, if you don't mind takin' a big chance..."

"Lead me to it!" snarled Bryan, his face suffusing with angry color which replaced the pallor. "What d'you mean?"

"I mean there's a brand in this book, the Flat Di'mond," said Nick. "It's owned by a jigger named Wambsganss, way down Dallas-way. Just four more strokes makes a Box X into a flat Diamond. 'Tain't likely Mister Wambsganss 'll have a rep at this round-up, his cows being several hundred miles away. Also, 'tain't likely Ghee or anybody 'll trouble to look up the brand, figuring it's just one of them little outfits that's here t'day and gone t'morrow, runnin' cows on the edge of the Injun Nations on lease.

"But we could slip the word to Lawson, to vent any Flat Diamonds he come across, and rebrand Hourglass before shipping..."

"Oh-h, I get you!" exploded Denver, admiringly. "Then when we run this cow 'n calf in today..."

"We'll likely start something rough," smiled Nick. "They'll be watchin', an' they'll know damn well what we did. But they won't dast come right out and say they know—Ghee, he won't, anyhow—'cause that'd be admitting they set a double-cross trap for two of their own men! Besides admitting the mavericking of the calf...

"But nobody must know about our fire here and now—that is, Denver, if you're with me, and ain't afraid to make over these lousy brands into a couple of good Wambsganss' Flat Diamonds!"

"Arrh!" growled Bryan savagely. "I'll start the fire an' heat my own iron. But you'll have to do the drawing on the hides, big fella. I wouldn't know a Flat Diamond from a Spookum Spiral, not ifn it up an' bit me!"

So it was that a few minutes later, in the depth of coulee, presumably out of sight of all human life of the Panhandle, a cow mother snorted and bawled, and her offspring squealed, while both became legal, if temporary, possessions of the far-away and unsuspecting Mr. Wambsganss.

## - 4 -

WHILE Nick Janos and Denver Bryan, their furtive branding done, were stamping out the fire and scattering the ashes, a swarthy man with uneven yellow teeth inched backward from a clump of pinon eighty yards distant. He turned and hurried on hands and knees, until a

low hill shut him from view from the rim of the coulee. Then he got his tethered horse, and walked him softly away, unseen and unsuspected by either of the new cowpunchers of the Box X.

On the swarthy, Yaqui face of Alicran, the half-breed, was a savagely triumphant and hopeful expression. He circled far, found himself a couple cows to haze along, and rejoined a farther part of the operation, about noon. No one remarked on his absence.

The long day passed. Nick and Denver, hazing along some sixteen varied animals bearing seven different brands, finally sighted the others converging on the round-up corrals.

The dust was suffocating. It hung so thick in the air that the figures even of cows and horses looked vague, unreal. Snatches of bawdy ballads, snarling of fatigued men, shouted bantering by others of better temper, all mingled with the anxious bawling of cow mothers who had been separated from their little nursing darlings on the drive.

One drive after another was brought near the big fires which now augmented the fading twilight, and the cattle thrown into the main herd. Dust-caked cowboys breathed weary relief, and rolled cigarettes as they lounged sidewise on gritty saddles.

Alicran came up toward Bryan and Janos. "Damn big round-up, huh?" greeted the breed, showing his crossed yellow tusks in a grin.

"Must be forty-fifty irons showin'," guessed Nick. "But where the hell are the reps? I don't see a one."

"Ghee don't like reps. They used to come. Not now," said Alicran. "Ghee is one tough bab-ee. You savvy?"

"Yeah, I savvy some things—too damn well," answered Janos slowly, his eyes searching the swarthy, lantern-pawed face and the beady black eyes of Alicran. "But there must be some other tough eggs in the Panhandle, who'd stick as reps no matter what."

"Four. All four dead," said Alicran softly.

"Oho—an' Ghee has four notches on his gun," replied Nick, just as softly. "I reckon I'm thanking you for something, Alicran—but I ain't sure just what. Mister Ghee is faster with his rod than you'd think, lookin' at him. Is that it?"

"The next fastest man shoots once—mebbe—while Ghee shoots twice. Only he hits de first tam," stated Alicran. With that he turned and walked his horse away, leaving a very grave and thoughtful man looking after him.

"That breed is wise," Nick said to Denver from the corner of his mouth. "He's tellin' me there will be gunplay soon, and that Mister Ghee is forked lightning with an equalizer."

"Glad to hear it!" snapped Denver uncompromisingly. "One thing I hate worst of all, an' that's to salivate a jigger whose gun ain't out of holster on a slow draw!"

THE EXPECTED encounter with the Box X boss did not occur until after chow, when Janos and Bryan, swinging up to the saddle again were bound for a spell of guard. As they approached one of the fires they saw Ghee, with Alicran at his side, evidently waiting.

"Hiya, boss," said Nick. "We kept our eyes peeled for Hourglass stuff, but there wasn't any to bring in."

Alicran had a fixed grin on his lantern jaw, but his black eyes were glittering, not with mirth. Ghee's teeth gritted audibly as he stared at the two new men. There was red murder in his bloodshot eyes, and he kept right hand on the butt of his Colt in holster.

"The hell yuh say!" he ground out savagely. Then: "Got the little one covered, Alicran?" he asked from the side of his mouth.

"Si!" croaked Alicran, his voice coarsening to a rasp.

"Okay. Now damn yuh, we'll talk,

you'n me, Mister Highpockets!" Ghee snarled at Nick Janos. "Keep your hand away f'm that gun—or else! Listen close. Savvy?"

"I'm listenin'. Go ahead an' speak your piece," said Nick quietly, as his glance met that of his comrade briefly.

Denver Bryan had his rope over the saddle horn, and was seeming to arrange the coils with his left hand. His face was stony, but as Nick's eyes fell upon him he winked fleetingly. There had been bad men of various sorts who had tried to run Nick ragged before this. Most of those bad men either were dead, or reformed. Now, without appearing to be doing anything much, Denver let down a short loop of his rope.

"I'll speak it, dontcha worry," said Ghee grimly. "You two hombres are drawin' down Box X wages—an' big wages. That means you work f'r me, an' do jest what I say, not think about ary scissorbill. Savvy? It strikes me you know too danged much f'r a cowhand. You an' the runt there seem to be lookin' f'r trouble. Well-ll, if so—this is the place to get it!"

There was a flashing upward movement as the last words crackled out, accompanied by the click-click of a double-action revolver being cocked.

Bryan's left hand holding the rope flashed up simultaneously. The loop struck stingingly under the tail of Ghee's mount—one place even a light touch will bring instant reaction from any range pony. With a surprised snort the horse leapt in air, landing stiff-legged and immediately going into a session of pitching.

Ghee was thrown backward, almost unseated. His gun thundered, belching flame which seared along his thigh, burning a hole in his Levis but not actually wounding him. Ghee yelled in a wild anger at the trick.

Nick drew flickeringly fast to cover Alicran—though with a queer doubt, which held him from pulling the trigger, in his mind.

The half-breed's gun belched flame. Tolman Ghee, with a red slash across his right cheekbone, and with the top part of the right ear torn away, toppled from the saddle. His pony departed, still bucking the empty saddle. Ghee was dragged a few feet by the left stirrup. But then his foot came free, and he lay still, stunned but not badly wounded. His trouser leg smoldered where the flash of his own gun had charred and ignited the cloth.

*"Poder de dios!"* screamed Alicran—winking, however, at the two astounded riders. "De trigger pull too hard—shoot off to right!"

Whereupon he tossed down his weapon, and held his hands high, facing the bewildered partners, who were speechless for a second or two. This was the last development they had imagined could occur.

"You shot Ghee, eh?" demanded Nick finally.

The half-breed looked hurt. "Me? It was accident," he explained. "I shoot at you, but de trigger pull too hard. De boss jump around an' get in way. Too bad..." And he winked again.

"Well I'll be damned!" breathed Nick.

"Mebbe so you boys pull out now? Den you live long, quien sabe?" suggested Alicran softly.

"We don't run," said Denver bluntly, but Nick caught his eye.

"This time I think we will," he decided. "That's only a graze on the side of Ghee's head, and he'll wake up soon. No use pressing your luck. We'll be going. Hmm. I reckon, Alicran, maybe we owe you something, but just the same, we don't cotton to your sort. We fight in the open. So don't try to throw in with us. So long."

The half-breed's eyes slitted, but his crooked teeth showed in a smile. "It is not you I think of," he said in perfectly enunciated English. "But hurry away now. I understand."

WITHOUT a word of farewell, even to the other riders who had approached to a distance of ten or twelve yards, looking gapingly at the fire-lit tableau, Janos and Bryan rode from the round-up camp. They watched back, but no one pursued.

There at the fire Alicran, dismounting, retrieved his gun from the ground, and then walked to bend over Tolman Ghee. The latter was moaning and twisting his head from side to side as consciousness returned.

The breed cursed softly to himself, as he looked down into the blood-smeared countenance of his employer.

"De next tam I shoot straight!" he muttered to himself, and straightened to beckon up the group of waiting riders.

Coincidence, or the conniving of malign fate, placed Denver Bryan and Nick Janos in a spot they would hate, come next forenoon.

They had started almost involuntarily for the creek, then for the Hourglass further along. But once away from the round-up camp, and in the bright silver moonlight streaming from a disc that seemed four times normal size as it ballooned above the horizon, they reined.

"I think we'll just make a dry camp tonight. We've had supper—an' if Ghee goes crazy mad and leads the Box X punchers on our trail for vengeance, I wouldn't want to bring a gunfight down on young Lawson. If tonight's peaceful, we'll go see him tomorrow."

"Anything's okay with me," nodded Denver, "just so I can grab a few hours shuteye. I'm fagged." And he yawned largely.

So it was that the two staked out their horses, and rolled up in blankets in the shelter of a copse not far from the creek. From this spot, not to be discovered at night unless a party actually combed the creek banks looking for them, they could see both sides of the stream for some distance. And about twenty minutes later, as they lighted up last smokes and puffed away contentedly—Nick saying that the happening had nullified certain plans he had made, but that others could be formulated to take care of the situation—they saw quite plainly a ghostly gray rider on a gray horse come from the direction of the Hourglass. He seemed to be chasing a gray steer, but neither Nick nor Denver got a good look at the animal there at first.

They were crouched and watching, however, when a bent form on foot came noiselessly and swiftly past them at a distance in the moonlight of perhaps one hundred yards. It looked like an Indian, trailing the man who chased the wild ghost steer.

"Was that Lawson on the gray pony?" queried Bryan. "And with a Piegan buck after him?"

Still swathed in his blanket, though sitting up, Nick Janos shook his head. "Too much for me," he admitted. "Things are damn queer on this range. But we'll see tomorrow..."

The words died in his throat as back in a circle came the running steer. The pursuing rider was close now, and suddenly came alongside. A shot sounded, and the steer tumbled head over heels to lie still in the moonlight.

The rider dismounted, tieing his pony to the ground. Then he busied himself with the beef. Though Nick and Denver could not make out details, they knew well enough what the man was doing, and soon lost avid interest.

"It's Lawson, and he's butchered that steer for tomorrow," yawned Nick at last. "Skinnin' it now. No sign of the Piegan—who's maybe waitin' back somewhere, in hopes of gettin' a haunch."

He waited an instant longer for some comment from Denver, but nothing more than a settling grunt came. Bryan was not interested in the food supply of the Hourglass, and soon breathed deeply and evenly. By and by a gentle

snore told that he had drifted into sleep.

BUT NEXT morning things happened with alarming swiftness and definite pattern that put Nick Janos and the smaller partner well back on their heels. They took their time about arising, but finally at about eight o'clock were ready to ride along to the Hourglass, where they hoped to strike the cook for a bite of breakfast and a cup of coffee. The meal would be finished, but on their long treks from range to range the two had encountered no difficulty in getting hospitality in this fashion. Usually strangers fared well.

When they rode in sight of the neat-looking L-shaped ranchhouse of the so-called nester and scissorbill, Lawson, however, it was to look with astonishment at half a dozen dusty horses tethered to the pole corral, and to see a group of men surrounding Lawson—the latter distinguishable plainly by reason of being bare-headed, and showing a yellow thatch like none other in the crowd.

There was a sound of heavy voice raised in angry argument.

"Hmm. There's Ghee an' Alicran," said Nick, urging his pony forward. "Those others ain't Box X though..."

"Bet that fella with the gray walrus mustache is Shurff Yates—we heard he had that kind of decoration," suggested Denver.

"Yates from Lamar?" asked Nick unbelievingly. "My gosh, they must've started in the middle of the night. It's only about eight o'clock now."

"S'pose we find out," snapped Denver, and spurred into the lead, making all of the group look up at him as he reined his pony back to its haunches."

Ghee scowled at their arrival, but Alicran flashed an inscrutable smile. The sheriff, who was accompanied by his undersheriff, Maxie Moffatt, a rotund, clean-shaven, capable individual, was inclined to ignore Nick Janos and Denver Bryan at first. He was listening to an indignant denial on the part of Lawson.

"I tell you I killed my own beef, butchered it, hung the meat in the cooling house, and put the hide right there on the fence!" he declared passionately. "These men are out to frame me!"

"Frame hell!" snarled Ghee. "You tell 'em, Alicran!"

As the sheriff turned cold eyes upon the half-breed, the latter shrugged.

"We watch this man, si," he nodded. "We know he kill Box X stuff. But las' night after supper is de firs' tam we catch him. I see him shoot, an' skin de cow. Den he takes hide an' stick it where you find it, under de haystack."

"That's a cold-blooded, damned lie!" stated Lawson furiously and helplessly. He had grown white around the mouth, evidently knowing that he was in a mesh of circumstantial evidence it would be most difficult to escape.

"Who are you guys? D'you know anything about this?" suddenly demanded Yates, turning upon Nick and Denver.

"Uh-h, we just seen him shoot the beef," said Bryan, and then turned deep red. He could have bitten out his tongue for admitting that much, for now Yates and Ghee both cross-examined. Denver, catching Nick's reproachful glance, had to go on then, savagely telling what they had seen. It was not much as evidence of killing Box X stuff, but it corroborated just what Alicran had told.

"And you're the hombre I helped yesterday!" said Lawson, looking with bitter contempt at Denver, who quailed. "Of course you take your pay from those buzzards—and damn well have to earn the dirty money, I suppose!"

"That cinches it, doesn't it, sheriff?" gloated Ghee. "As soon as Alicran came and reported that to me, I sent a man in for you. And I reckon we got our case, all right, all right!"

DENVER BRYAN was just about to declare himself passionately to Lawson when there came an interruption. A tall, blue-eyed and good-looking girl, slender but rounded of figure, came riding up from beyond the corral. She wore a dusty but well-fitting habit of brown, and forked her small black pony like a ranchwoman born.

She made a picture of imperious beauty as she slipped to the ground and turned to face the men.

"Patsy!" cried Lawson in agonized accents. "I wish you'd..."

"What's the meaning of this?" she demanded, ignoring the yellowhead, and facing Yates and Ghee. Alicran slipped back a pace. Her tanned cheeks flushed with anger, her blue eyes blazing, she looked the part of a mountain lioness about to pounce. "You, Sheriff Yates, speak up! You know me and I know you! What is this, anyway?"

That officer looked as though he wished himself elsewhere. He turned brick red, but then a certain stubbornness came into the lines of his face. After all he had been yanked out of bed long before his usual rising hour, and had come a long way—to find a situation all too usual in this country since the law had sided with nesters.

"I'm shore sorry as h—huh, Miss Keane," he blurted out. "I don't like this kinda business none a-tall, but I gotta take Lawson here back to town with me. He's been caught butcherin' beef he don't own, an' that ain't right. Ghee's swearin' out a warrant."

"Don't worry, Pat," said Lawson himself. "They're framing me, of course, but I'll get out of it all right."

"With Alicran an' them two strangers swearin' you kilt the beef? Fat chance!" gloated Ghee.

Patsy Keane turned her scornful, burning blue eyes upon the squirming Denver.

"You!" she cried, and the word was a malediction. "I watched through binoculars yesterday! You are the little man he saved from going over that cutbank! And this is the way you repay him for courage and risking his life to save yours!"

Denver Bryan, abject shame and misery in every line of his squirming figure, tried to remonstrate, to explain, but simply could find no words at all. Everything against him, he instinctively turned to the tall pardner for assistance.

Nick Janos made a game attempt. "Ma'am," he said, "we shore didn't aim to add to Lawson's troubles. We ain't..."

That was as far as he got, for Lawson himself interrupted bitterly, stalking up to face Nick squarely.

"I reckon we can guess your game all right," he stated with repressed fury. "You draw fightin' pay—a hundred a month—from the Box X. That's lying pay too, it seems. No honest man ever works for the Box X spread. Don't pay any more attention to this, Pat. I'm ready to go with you now, Sheriff. Pat 'll stay here, but I want you to do something to protect her from these liars and murderers."

"Pat's going along—to jail if you go," she stated firmly. "After all, Steve Lawson, I got you into this, I'll stick."

Sheriff Yates swung around. "I want that hide for evidence," he said. "Roll it tight, so's I can pack it on my saddle."

Ghee himself went for the hide, which had been draped on the top pole of the corral. He returned, dragging it. Nick's eyes narrowed as he looked at the green hide, and he scratched his chin thoughtfully.

Alicran came with the horses, and Yates mounted. He turned to the two partners.

"I want you two f'r the preliminary hearin' t'morrow mornin'," he told them. "Be in Lamar at nine o'clock sharp."

"We'll be there," promised Nick.

"Better take 'em along an' keep 'em in the juzgado. They might run out," said Ghee in an aside.

"I only got one cell an' that's six b' eight feet," fumed Yates. "I ain't goin' to board no more pris'ners, anyhow. The county don't pay me enough. They'll come though—or I'll come after 'em!"

BOTH DENVER and Nick started to smile at this statement, evidently considered the direst of threats by Yates, but then the sheer nastiness of the whole situation swept back over their consciousness, and scowls returned.

All but the two partners got going toward Lamar. Alicran turned and grinned his yellow-toothed grin back at them, and furtively made a gesture with his gun hand. They ignored him. Together they watched the little cavalcade until its dust had disappeared in distance.

"Patsy Keane—that gal—an' his pardner!" moaned Denver. "Aw-w hell, if there was a good deep mine anywhere around, I'd go dig me a deep hole in the bottom of it, an' crawl in! I never felt so damn low in my whole life, Nick! Ain't there something you can figure out to do for Lawson an' —an' that swell-lookin' lady?"

"I'm trying to dope something right now, runt. Keep your shirt on. Lawson ain't tried and convicted of anything yet—an' this country has got peaceful enough so there ain't no danger of lynching. Not with Yates and his deputy on the job.

"But we have a busy day ahead, and we ain't had breakfast. Suppose you go in the ranch-house an' see if the cook 'll stake us to a meal. If there ain't a cook, look and see what you can find."

The ranch-house proved to be empty, but the larder was well stocked, and there was a half full gallon coffee pot left on the back of the kitchen range, the liquid inside still hot. The two ate hungrily of bacon and eggs, with chunks of fresh bread evidently baked just the day before, and practically finished the coffee.

When they had cleaned up the dishes, Nick rolled a smoke, and divulged what he had in mind. Denver listened in silence, a beginning grin starting to widen his generous mouth. When Nick finished, an ejaculation burst from him, and he stood up to try an impromptu jig.

"It's game, you bet!" he chortled. "I knowed you'd find something, Nick. Wheee! It's a good chance, no foolin'. If we just put it over, that mush-nose, Ghee'll catch it right smack between the horns! Let's travel, fella! I can't rest, thinking of that gal's blue eyes. Did you ever see scorn sparks come scooting like that before?"

"I'm wondering where that Injun lady is. Snow-at-Sundown—was that her name? But I reckon we can't waste time lookin' for her," said Nick. "She's likely back home by now. So let's go."

They rode away from the Hourglass, taking a roundabout course and then crossing the creek lower down. There they stopped, and for the first time took the precaution of tying down their revolver holsters with lengths of whang leather. They were venturing now deep into the Box X range, and both knew their lives would be forfeit if they failed to protect themselves from start to finish.

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IN THE rolling short-grass prairie, amid copses of pinion and blue sweeps of nodding flowers still undaunted by the drouth, they saw the beef herds grazing under the eyes of several punchers.

"Ain't a soul

around, except the day herders, Denver," smiled Nick. "Looks as if things are breaking our way for a change."

"Seems thataway," agreed Denver. "I'll bet a man the one-slug rule is off the likker keg, and all the hands is visiting it regularly while Ghee is gone."

"Okay with me. But now let's see what we can find over in this here draw. There won't be anybody to see."

Twenty minutes later they emerged from the opposite end of the draw designated, hazing a small bunch of cattle. Keeping to the coulees, and careful watch for any day herders, they worked back to the creek and crossed it. Fifteen minutes later they had reached Hourglass range, some of the acres which the homesteader Lawson owned.

They drove the cows down into a cut coulee, and for some time then Denver Bryan sat his horse out in plain sight—which also meant he could watch a long distance in all directions—while he smoked, and occasionally grinned a little to himself. This was grim enough business, but he saw a certain savage humor in it.

One by one, during the hour that followed, cattle drifted up and out of the coulee. Nick Janos remained out of sight down there. Only once did the watcher outside leave the scene. That was when he spurred his horse to the Lawson ranch-house. There he quickly secured a burlap potato sack, a pick and a short-handled shovel. These he took to Nick, then quickly rode up and out of the coulee to resume watch.

As the westering sun neared the horizon, Nick suddenly whistled a signal, and Denver, who had been waiting for that, rode down and joined him. Together they rode out of the coulee and past the Lawson ranch. There the pick and shovel were returned, after which the partners went on toward Lamar. Nick had the burlap bag across the pommel of his saddle, and the sack bulged with some bulky object.

"Dang but you shore got off easy this time," said Nick wearily, heaving a deep breath. "I'm plumb tuckered, and I got blisters as big as quarters on my hands, from swingin' that pick. Dawggone what a tool. Who'd want to leave the sea and be a miner, huh?"

"Not me," agreed Denver cheerily. "I don't get along with jassacks, nohow. And I salivated one jigger who told me that was 'cause opposites attracted. . . ."

"Huh, I got ideas about that," said Nick. "But seriously, you shore you know what to do when we hit Lamar?"

"Shore I do, old-timer."

"Well, keep spelling it out in your skull so there won't be any mistakes. You'n me are runnin' a rannikaboo on the law, an' if the sheriff should get wise—whoo-ee! We'd get free board an' room at Huntsville from now on—if we didn't get a rope!"

Over and over as they covered the sixteen miles to Lamar, the two partners discussed their plan. It still seemed harebrained but sound, provided everything went as intended. When at last the lights of the town honky-tonks showed through the night. Denver went ahead at a lope, while Nick loitered and wasted twenty minutes, staying far away from the stage road that led into town.

DENVER BRYAN let his mount slow down to a walk as he entered the end of the dusty main street. The saddle shop, blacksmith shop and general merchandise store run by Holy Joe Hackett, all were dark at this hour. But down between the *Bottom Dollar Saloon,* and the old Squeejaw Palace of Recreation, a dim light showed in the window of the small building which was the sheriff's office and the one-cell jail combined. Denver dismounted at the hitchrack there, and looked through the dusty

window. He could make out the vague shape of Sheriff Yates seated at his desk, poring over some papers—probably a new batch of reward notices received through the mail.

The sheriff scowled a little, and his half-burned Wheeling stogie tilted with premonitory belligerence as he recognized the visitor who walked right into the office.

"Oh, it's you," he grunted. "What d'you want?"

"Just a few words with you, sweetheart," grinned Denver amiably. "It'll take a minute to get my jaw-waggin' through, so I'll set. Thanks," and he took the only other chair which Sheriff Yates pointedly had not proffered.

"All right, talk," bade Yates without cordiality. He thought he knew the inwardness of this dirty business, though the proof was all on the other side, and Bryan was one of the supposed connivers. Bryan was, too—but not as Yates suspected.

"You're all wrong in what you think about Nick Janos and me," stated Denver without further preamble. Nick's my long string bean of a pardner. So I rode in to kinda set you right, sabe?"

Yates said nothing, but his expression was sour. He waited.

"Nick an' me worked a spell for the Box X," stated Denver, "but we quit yesterday."

"Yeah? An' you was forkin' a Box X hoss—a claybank—when I saw you?" Sarcasm dripped from the words.

"That hoss was the Box X's pet outlaw. I rode him straight up, an' sorta acquired ownership. Ghee let me trade in my own kinda swayback veteran, an' take the one they called El Popo—named after a Mex volcano, they tell me. I dunno yet whether I like the trade, or not. He's a fast hoss, but plumb mean. I've been ridin' him a lot right now, and he's mild, but just the second he gets an oat feed and a few hours of rest, I know he'll kick hell outa the atmosphere again."

"Well, if he's yours, why haven't you vented the brand?"

"No time. Things has come along too fast. We left the spread in one hell of a hurry."

The sheriff grew sullenly red under his tan. He thought he saw the reason for this change.

"Oh sure," he sneered. "As a couple of drifters, not drawin' pay any more f'm the Box X, your evidence will carry more weight. Isn't that it? You aim to chivvy Lawson into jail, playin' Toll Ghee's game."

Denver shrugged. "I don't suppose I'll get anywhere, you bein' set on that," he admitted sadly. "But I'm tellin' you straight. You act like you was sidin' with Steve Lawson."

"Arrh!" snarled Yates, "I can't side one way or t'other, but I tell you right here, I hate my part in this—an' I'm thinkin' of turnin' in my star! The whole thing stinks. Nobody in the world 'd be damn fool enough to butcher an off-color steer like that!" And he jerked a thumb at the incriminating hide, hung on a rack at the end of the office. It showed plainly spotted, unusual. "Even s'posin' a rustler was that rash, he'd have sense enough to cut out the Bar X brand, 'stead of leavin' it to show against him. Hell, it only takes two-three seconds to cut out a brand!

"No-o, fella, Ghee is framin' the kid, an' Alicran Coombs is backin' his dirty work. You two strangers are in it too, an' I tell you plain, once an' for all, I don't like you two an' never will. Get the hell outa here now an' leave me work."

He swung around angrily to his pile of papers.

Looking as discomfited as he could, Denver obeyed. He slammed the door at his back, thus earning a last scowl from Yates.

Outside the building a dark blot moved. A hand closed on Denver's shoulder. It was Nick Janos. There ensued a moment of whispering, and then

Denver moved off down the street. A tinkling music box in the *Bottom Dollar* was playing, but that was the only sound to break the silence of a night when patronage was scant.

Ducking between buildings, Denver yanked his .44 and thumbed out six fast shots into the moonlit sky. The reports reverberated thunderously in the quiet of a mid-week night.

THE EFFECT of those shots upon the somnolent town was magical. The deserted street suddenly overflowed with bartenders, loafers, gamblers, transients from the Lamar House, cowboys, and even a single Chinaman, Jim Ling, who came out of his restaurant-laundry with hands in his long black sleeves. There was shouting and hoarse questioning. No one seemed to know the direction of the shots. Meanwhile Denver had been reloading swiftly, and then slipped unobtrusively into the milling crowd near the Squeejaw.

Sheriff Yates came clattering down the untuned xylophone of board sidewalk, panting from anger and the unaccustomed sprint.

"Who done that shootin' he bawled. "Speak up! Who done it, an' where?"

There was no immediate answer, for the simple reason that only one person knew, and Denver was acting as innocent as a new-laid egg.

"Must 've been some drunk," finally piped up a bartender. "That was too fast shootin' to be aimed much of any."

"Mebbe it was two guns," hazarded a cowboy. "The' was a Toscosa two-gunman come through here last week."

Yates growled in his throat. He was a conscientious man, however, so got a lantern and made a methodical search, especially of the dark lanes between the various false-fronted buildings, and the vicinity of the cribs behind the four chief saloon-dancehalls. During round-up time in September most of the girls took vacation, however, and all the cribs were dark. There was no sprawled corpse anywhere. At length Yates shrugged, stated that he'd crawl the hump of a drunken cowboy if he caught him giving false alarms like this, and clumped back to his office-jail.

Now Denver Bryan got the weary claybank from the sheriff's hitchrack, and rode to the livery stable. There he paid for an oat feed for the animal, put him in a stall, and rubbed him down thoroughly with wisps of bay, taking his own time to the job.

Just as he was finishing, Nick Janos rode in. He also paid the hostler for accommodations for his mount, and an oat feed.

"How'd you make out?" whispered the smaller man at first glance.

"Just about perfect, I think," grinned Nick, and led the way out toward a bar. "I was well out of town before the sheriff was through huntin' for a miscreant."

"Didja ditch the—the—?" whispered Denver, not naming the object.

"Shore did. A feed right now's what's worryin' me. I spent the last coins I had for the hoss, an' I know we can't expect to change one of our bills here. They'd think it counterfeit, sure as hell."

"I got a buck left," said Denver. "But I'd sooner drink than eat."

"Let's compromise—one drink an' one two-bit of Mex chile apiece. It'll be a long day t'morrow," suggested Nick.

That program was accepted; and after hoisting one brimming beaker apiece at the Squeejaw, the two cleaned the deep bowls of chile provided at the small bar in back by the Mexican woman known as Witch Menendez, smoked a final cigaret apiece, and retired to the hay loft of the livery stable for the night.

The fuse had been lighted for a bomb explosion which would rock the

Panhandle range. But that fuse would burn long.

## - 6 -

DURING the next three weeks the chuck wagon of the Box X was bewitched. The cook, known as a heavy sleeper, blamed the disappearance of haunches of beef, smoked hams, sacks of flour, tobacco and other items, on the cowboys. They probably took the stuff and sold it to one of the scissorbill outfits, he sulkily supposed. He slept with a gun near his hand, but that did him no good at all when he did not awaken. Poor fellow, he never did solve the mystery—though a pair of unshaven drifters, hiding out seven miles away, could have told him much.

Those drifters were Nick Janos and Denver Bryan. How they came there, pirating food and smoking materials from the enemy's camp, should be elucidated briefly.

First, they had appeared at the preliminary hearing in Lamar the next morning after Denver's visit to Sheriff Yates. Unwillingly they testified to having seen Steve Lawson shoot and butcher a steer. When pressed to describe the steer, Denver claimed his eyesight was poor in moonlight, but Nick grudgingly admitted he thought the animal was spotted rather plainly, so you couldn't miss it.

That brought a crow of triumph from Tolman Ghee, who had not expected this much luck.

Judge Usher warned Ghee sharply. The judge was an old-time cowman himself, and he distrusted the Box X and all of those connected with it. The next time anybody disturbed the court that person was going to be fined.

Alicran testified that he had watched the shooting and skinning of the steer, after which he had seen Lawson drag the heavy fresh hide of the spotted steer, over to a haystack. There Lawson buried it under the hay.

The hearing was short. Save for an earnest denial, Steve Lawson had no evidence to offer. The sheriff, questioned about the hide, offered to produce it.

"I had to keep it guarded, so's nobody 'd steal it," he stated. "Maxie Moffatt's been with it all the time I wasn't. So it's right there. Maxie's put it in a tub to soak, so's it don't get too damn hard, but I c'n get it if you say..."

"I doubt that's necessary," said the judge wearily. "This is not a trial, merely a hearing, and I'm afraid the evidence is plain enough so I must hold the defendant for trial. I shall place the bail at the minimum, one thousand dollars..."

"Oh Judge! A thousand dollars!" cried Patsy Keane in a horrified voice. "We—Steve and I—couldn't raise that much now. I—couldn't you make it a hundred?"

"A hundred for a cow thief who oughta be lynched!" burst out Ghee.

DOWN CAME the judge's gavel. "I fine you twenty-five dollars for contempt of court!" he thundered, glowering at the Box X man. "No, Miss Patsy," continued the judge with regret, "the bail amounts are set by law. I have given the minimum, which is all I can do."

"Oh-h," she said in a small, dismayed voice, "that means S-Steve has to stay in jail—a long time."

"Three weeks and two days," said the judge. "The calendar is empty, so I can put this case first."

So it was that Steve Lawson went behind bars, and Patsy Keane, sided as much as possible by her friend, the Indian girl Snow-at-Sundown, went back to the homestead to try her best to keep a herd together. It looked next

thing to hopeless, as she discouragedly admitted, since even when the trial would come up, there was the plain evidence of three eye-witnesses to combat. Steve Lawson looked certain of a term in State's prison, which would leave the Hourglass at the mercy of Ghee and his men.

Nick and Denver, for certain reasons of their own, wanted to remain on this range anyhow. But now they also felt a peculiar interest in the outcome of Lawson's trial. Since any ordinary job with outfits such as the Rafter T, Circle B or any other of the standard ones was out of the question for them, the decent cattlemen knowing full well that Lawson was being whipsawed by the Box X, the pardners rode away presumably forever, then circled, found a spot where their horses and camp would be well concealed and out of the way. There they stayed, only the raids upon the Box X chuck wagon connecting them directly with humankind. This piracy they thoroughly enjoyed, though it was risky. Yet the other work which filled their days was even riskier.

Nick had a certain message he wanted to deliver, after they had been three or four days in the hideout. So he took to haunting the vicinity of the Hourglass. He kept out of the way of the overworked girl Patsy, however. Only when one day he saw the figure of Mrs. Sack Sanders approaching on horse back did he dare reveal himself.

He waylaid this Indian girl, and walked his horse from ambush in front of her, lifting his sombrero as he did.

"Mrs. Sanders?" he asked, and then hurried on as he saw the young woman's black eyes flash, and her hand stray back toward her quirt.

"I'm askin' you to take a message to Miss Patsy Keane—an' also to Steve Lawson," said Nick. "I know what you think of Denver and me, but never mind that. I'm telling you, Miss, two things. First off, Steve Lawson is going to have a good chance at goin' free on acquittal. Second—and here, ma'am, you have to use your own range savvy a bit to understand—the Hourglass has been losin' cows to the Box X."

"It doesn't take savvy to know that," snapped Snow-at-Sundown.

"No'm. The savvy comes now. Tell Steve an' Miss Patsy—*and nobody else!* that there's a considerable number of cows bearing a foreign brand, 'round here now. That brand's the Flat Diamond. It really belongs to a fellow named Wambsganss clear down Dallas-way.

"Funny, isn't it, how cows could come that far? Mr. Wambsganss ain't likely to send any reps up here. So-o, if Steve Lawson, when he gets loose, should vent those Flat Diamonds an' ship him some beef, why I don't reckon anybody'd ever object. That's all I come to say, ma'am, except the whole bunch of you've got my pardner and me all wrong. But you'll find that out soon enough. Just..."

"Wait!" called Snow-at-Sundown sharply, as Nick started away. "What does this Flat Diamond look like?"

Nick Janos grinned. He reached to hip pocket, and brought out the Texas brand book over which he had spent so much study.

"Take it and welcome. I won't be needing it any more, ma'am," he chuckled, and gave it to her. Then before she could clear her forehead of a puzzled frown in which were beginnings of a wary hope for her two friends, Nick neck-reined his pony and was galloping away.

"Well, I'll be hornswoggled!" breathed the Indian girl. She stared after the retreating horse and rider. Then she made a baffled sound in her throat, and opened the brand book, rapidly turning the pages. Five minutes later, an almost frightened smile on her lovely countenance, she tucked away the brand book in her blouse, and started for the Hourglass ranchhouse at a gallop.

THE BOX X was on the fringe of the broken country which extended into No Man's Land—that strip of territory which one day would become the panhandle of the State of Oklahoma, but which now was the hiding place of the remnants of nine or ten unpacified Indian tribes, and of bands of men wanted badly by sheriffs and marshals everywhere.

The box canyon in which Nick and Denver had made their headquarters, was in direct line only some seven miles from the Box X. But in between lay some of the roughest and wildest country in the section. Only something like a search by a large posse, or untoward accident, could make their presence known. But they guarded as well as possible against both contingencies.

However one chill dawn two weeks after that meeting between Nick and Snow-at-Sundown found a thin spiral of blue smoke drifting skyward from the hideout in the box canyon. It was the first day of October, and much cooler than was usual here at that date. Nick and Denver shivered and drew close to their small cooking fire, on which was a large-sized Box X skillet sizzing four thick slices of bacon on one side, and an inch-thick porterhouse steak on the other. A blackened coffee pot standing in the side of the fire had started to bubble at the spout.

"It's g-gettin' too damn cold for this," said Denver, his teeth chattering. "How m-much l-longer do we have to stay?"

"Only a few days more now, pardner," smiled Nick, good-naturedly. "You shore hogged the blankets last night. And snore! Whoo-ee. If Toll Ghee was listenin', I bet he could have heard you all the way to Squaw Creek!"

"I never snored in my life!" countered Denver indignantly. "Even when I take a drink or two, I—huh!" His tone changed abruptly. "Lookit! Follow my arm. D'you see something I see? Oh hell, it's gone. But Nick, do you know I think somebody was over to that low butte, lyin' on his belly, an' watchin' us through glasses?"

"Oh-oh!" said Nick concernedly. "Well, pardner, your eyes ain't usually wrong. That means..." and he shrugged.

"Means gettin' the hell out of here quick!" said Denver. "But I'm eatin' breakfast even if Yates and the Million Minions of Mexico come swarmin' after us!"

"I don't think there's that much hurry," said Nick slowly. "Binoculars ...mmm. Denver, I wouldn't wonder much if that was Snow-at-Sunrise or Miss Patsy Keane. Ghee don't go in for fancy spyin'. He'd just ride us down an' shoot. I think I'll take a pasear over there now, and read the sign. You make ready to move camp."

"Yeah? But what 'll do with the thirty-forty ear-crop mavericks we been turnin' into that dead end canyon?"

"Leave 'em right there. They won't stray far. And even if they do, there'll be another round-up come spring."

EATING swiftly, then swallowing two cups of scalding black coffee, Nick Janos got his horse then, saddled, and rode away toward the low butte his comrade had indicated. Nick kept to the coulee, but he had at least a dozen good looks at the butte without descrying anything. He wondered if Denver's eyes had fooled him. But when he left his horse hidden, and wearily climbed the low eminence on foot, he took one good look, and whistled to himself.

Here right near the edge of the butte, lay a silvermounted quirt. The last time he had glimpsed that quirt or one very like it, Patsy Keane had been carrying it under her left elbow when she stormed forth to protect Steve Lawson from Sheriff Yates there at the pole corral of the Hourglass.

So this girl had been watching Denver and himself. Had she seen the

crop-eared mavericks? Nick frowned to himself as he rode back to tell Denver, and decided to make a cautious trip over in the direction of the Hourglass at once. If Patsy Keane disbelieved what he had told Snow-at-Sundown, and wanted to discredit their trial evidence beyond all manner of doubt, all she had to do now was to bring Yates and Maxie Moffatt and show them what she had discovered. The names of Nick Janos and Denver Bryan would be mud—until the time came that the pen authorities gave them numbers instead of names.

And *that* might muddle the plan of Tolman Ghee so badly that Steve Lawson would go free without any voluntary help on the part of Janos and Bryan!

"My guess is Patsy Keane don't believe us a-tall. She'll take a plumb certainty rather than bank on us, an' I don't blame her," Nick said quietly. "So you get goin', pardner. That sulphur spring place 'll do for us now." He named a spot about four miles distant, where steaming sulphur water from which cattle shied away, came out of a small spring. They had considered this as a hideout, but distaste for spending three weeks drinking the stuff and spoiling their coffee with it, had brought them to the box canyon instead.

"What're *you* doin'?" asked Denver grumpily. He hated to do any sort of chore alone, though when in Nick's company no work was too tedious or too hard. "You think a call'll stop her?"

"No-o, but if she ain't there now, I'll say she's on the way to Lamar. If she ain't gone, I just might have a little talk with her. The trial's a-comin' up soon."

"Aw-w, all right," acceded Denver. "So long—only next time, dammit, *you* do the camp movin' and let me gallivant around with the females."

An hour later, on foot and moving with extreme caution, Nick approached the Hourglass ranch-house. There was one pony tethered at the corral, but to whom it belonged he could not guess. For some time as he crept closer and closer, there was no other sign of human presence at the place.

AS HE DREW close he heard a chair go over with a crash, and a choked cry in a feminine voice.

"Ah senorita!" came the oily voice of the half-breed known as Alicran Coombs. "I am frien'. Don't be scairt."

"You? A friend, you sulking, lying breed? I think not. Get out of here! Touch me again, and..."

"Ah but leesten, ha-ha!" sniggered the breed. "I can feex all, so your man will come free. I can writ de confession about de steer hide. *Val-game dios*, that I will do if..."

"If what?" The words snapped like a lash.

"If you weel be nice to me now," he answered arrogantly. "Who is to know? What difference it make? You. Me...ah-h!"

*Crack!* The unmistakable sound of an open palm against cheek. Then a scuffle, and hurrying steps.

"Get out of here now, or I'll slice you wide open!" came the girl's angry voice. "Git! If I should tell what you've said to me, they'd hang you to the first tree, half-breed!"

"Oh now, Senorita..."

That was when Nick Janos opened the kitchen door, stepped inside, and then dropped his gun back into holster when he saw that Alicran had laid aside his gun belt with holstered revolver—probably expecting a better and smoothier result to his courting than he had received.

Now his eyes snapped wide, till the whites showed all around the onyx beads of irises. Alarm and hate—and probably mania of a sort, Nick understood with a sudden chill.

Alicran did not parley. He came cat-footing fast, his right hand flash-

ing back to the neckband of his shirt, and half-drawing a long knife holstered there.

Nick took one forward step also, swinging his right fist from the floor. It uppercut squarely into the cleft, swarthy chin. Then as Alicran stopped dead, straightening, Nick hammered him flat with a left hook carrying all the smashing power of his height and powerful torso.

Alicran skidded head first under the kitchen range. Nick did not hesitate. He hauled him forth by the heels, lifted him over one shoulder and carried him straight out from the kitchen door and around to where the tethered horse waited.

There Nick removed the half-breed's suspenders, and the long silk scarf from his neck. With these two articles he tied the fellow face down across his own saddle, wrists and ankles knotted securely to the cinches. Then, winding the reins around the saddle horn, he gave the horse a slap on the rump, and had the satisfaction of seeing it jog away at a slow trot—a gait no cowboy will allow when he is in the saddle right way up, as it jolts too greatly. After a little of this Alicran would not have any stomach left for anything.

Nick turned back toward the house, to find Patsy Keane confronting him, the silver-mounted quirt in her hands, and a look of distrust and puzzlement corrugating her smooth forehead.

"You found this—where?" she demanded coldly.

"On the butte," he said quietly. "I came right over, thinking mebbe you might be doin' something you'd be sorry for afterwards."

"Such as?" she demanded uncompromisingly.

"Well-ll, like going straight for Yates, maybe," he said. "I know you can't see it, but that'd mess up things."

"For you, perhaps."

"For Steve Lawson, too," he said earnestly. "Denver an' I know that things look bad for us, but I'm tellin' you, ma'am, we're your friends..."

"On terms like that half-breed wanted to make, I suppose?" she retorted stingingly.

NICK STRAIGHTENED, and slow color came into his cheeks. "I'm beggin' your pardon for interruptin', ma'am," he said stiffly, doffing his sombrero again and turning toward his horse. He heard the girl start to speak in a bewildered way, perhaps a trifle ashamed of her outburst, excusable though it was, but went right on. Damn women anyhow. You couldn't ever get 'em to listen to any sort of reason.

But Patsy Keane was a girl of temper. She could be impulsive, too. Now she made a swift decision, and ran straight after Nick Janos, overtaking him before he had untethered the waiting pony.

"I—I beg your pardon!" she said swiftly. "Snow-at-Sundown told me—b-but I found it hard to believe, even when I saw those cows..." She thrust forth one small hand for a shake. "B-but I think I do believe you now. I want you to forgive me. It all is so—hard to understand."

Nick smiled and drew a deep breath as he clasped her hand briefly. "Well, ain't that something!" he said, exhaling. "But then the's something to do right now. Here—" and he drew a folded, pencil-written paper from his shirt pocket. "This is a telegram to send right now to Peter Wambsganss down near Dallas. The address is there—an it ain't a ranch. That made me think. I was down there once. A lot of retired ranchmen've got brands they keep up, with only a few head of stock. This looks like one of 'em—and I'm hoping. You send this wire right off, and if a favorable reply comes, you send him this..."

And unscrewing the heel of one boot, Nick unwadded a small piece of

orange-backed paper laying a $1000 banknote in the palm of the astounded girl.

"If Wambsganss'll sell that brand for a thousand, all will be gas and gaiters for Steve when he gets out, 'cause we've been branding as many cow-critters Flat Diamond as Ghee has been able to steal from the Hourglass and rebrand Box X. Steve Lawson can pay me back first shipment of beef he makes. . . ."

"Oh-h—but what if he doesn't get out, go free?" she almost wailed. "You—you're too good, but it's all hanging on that, isn't it? And Steve's lawyer tells him he hasn't got a chance in the world. The lawyer wants him to plead guilty and hope for a short sentence. And that—that would just about kill me!"

"Listen!" said Nick earnestly. "Denver an' me *will get Steve free!* I'm *promisin'* that, ma'am! Now you do that part with the wire to Wambsganss, an' tell Steve no matter what comes, he's to plead *not guilty!* We'll do the rest!"

She straightened. "Well, sir," she breathed, "I'm going to trust what you say! I'll go and send the wire, and see Steve. He won't plead guilty. I don't think he ever would have, anyhow. B-but, if you had this much money, why didn't you bail out Steve and let him ride free to help? He. . ."

"Ma'am," said Nick seriously, touching his hat in farewell salute, "I done thought of that. Then I knew this way was best. Steve will be alive now when it's all finished. If he'd been out on the range, they'd have killed him sure. So. . ."

"Oh, just one last thing. Maybe you were right about Steve. He always took such chances. But the thing I remembered was this. I was followed back here by that half-breed, when I came from the butte. I—I'm afraid he saw what I saw there."

"Oh-ho," said Nick. "Then I better fog along. Alicran'll be thirstin' for our blood—an' Denver an' me want to keep it flowin' in its reglar channels till after the trial, anyhow. So long, ma'am!"

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NICK JANOS rode straight for the box canyon where he and Denver Bryan had camped, figuring that the smaller partner might not have moved camp as yet. Or even if he had done so, the trail probably would show, and Nick could catch up with him in a little time.

But there was no sign of Denver in the place. All the bedding and utensils were gone. Casting about for a sign, Nick suddenly frowned. It looked as though there had been more than one horse here—three or four, in fact! And the trail which led away did not start toward that sulphur spring rendezvous, but toward the canyon in which they had sequestered the lop-eared mavericks!

All of a sudden, from a height of blithe confidence that all was well, and that the schemes of the robber-killers of the Box X were all set to be frustrated, Nick descended to a sudden chilling depth of premonition. Disaster had come! But how?

"That damn half-breed hasn't had time to get free an' come," said Nick aloud to himself. "Maybe more'n one was there at the butte, though. "By gawd, if Ghee has jumped my partner. . ."

His mouth shut like a steel trap then. He would follow the trail of the horses, and do his best to find out. Much of this country in the breaks had a sandy surface. It might be possible

to trail even from horseback. He'd have a try.

A brush fence had kept the mavericks from leaving the dead end canyon. Now, as Nick rode up, following the trail which queerly led straight here, he saw that the brush fence was down. The cattle all had been cleaned out of the canyon! Yes, here was their plain trail, leading away into the rough country of salt basins, sinks and arroyos. Mouth thinning to a slash, but concern that was deadly fear for Bryan plain in his eyes, Nick followed as fast as he could keep to the spoor.

Onward a mile, two miles—and an abrupt stop. A sickening lump rose in Nick's throat as he saw and understood. Directly ahead in the path of those cattle tracks, lay a fifty-foot-wide strip of that nastiest quicky known as soaphole bog. This is the worst ever, simply because it looks solid, with a dry, brittle crust. But the weight of a man or horse—or cow—breaks the crust instantly. And then the human or animal is down in the sucking terror, doomed.

Here and now, breaks through the treacherous white surface told their plain, horrible story. The largest part of those yearlings branded Flat Diamond were down in that bog!

But that was not the worst of it. Far from it. Nick choked as he saw the real evidence. There was his partner's Stetson, half sunk in the slime! Nick turned away, sickened. His little partner in that suffocating black hole! A wave of nausea made him retch. Beads of perspiration gathered on his brow, along the backs of his hands.

A few minutes later he forced himself to examine sign more closely; but it was only to find more damning evidences of murder. There were deep heel marks along the edge of the bog, and a slash of sticky crimson not yet turning brown, told of the heartrending fact. A man had died there and gone into the bog. A man as well as cattle.

White with a hate that churned like a turbine within him, Nick Janos flung himself to the saddle, whirled the pony, and set out for the Box X spread. He would finish this business—and probably himself with it. But for self he had no more cares. Denver was dead.

AT THE BOX X, the pair of punchers who were to stand first guard had ridden out to the herd. The two weary men they relieved came to headquarters, unsaddled and turned loose their ponies, and then strode to the lighted mess tent.

Ghee had taken the keg of whiskey from the mess wagon, and placed it in the tent on top of a small table. Dippers of forty-rod were filled, emptied, filled again. Of those who came and went, and of the three who stayed in the tent, all were in the humor of beginning intoxication—save one. Over in a corner the swarthy half-breed, Alicran Coombs, massaged sore and possible cracked ribs, glowered to himself, drank nothing at all, and smoked an endless chain of cigarets into which a one-third portion of dried and flaked marijuana leaf was crumbled.

The drug clotted and concentrated the hatred which now the breed felt toward the world at large, and Nick Janos in particular. Vivid visions of startling revenges beside which the drawing and quartering of the fourteenth century was tame stuff, chased each other through his brain.

Ghee, watching the pinches of marijuana taken from shirt pocket for each cigaret, saw trouble coming. The whiskey was doing things to his own brain. It seemed to give him added vision and understanding. He knew now that Alicran hated him, and that the shot which had caused the loss of the top part of his ear, and the wad of cotton and collodion along his cheekbone and temple, had been meant for his brain. But Ghee knew his own speed. He

could wait for some overt move on the part of the henchman.

Around the stove, sometimes between them, and often stopping to sip whiskey from a filled dipper, the cook went through the motions of his profession with various dishes and pots. But he was rocking back on his heels, swaying a little. And the side looks he cast now and then both at Ghee and Alicran, had no affection in them.

Suddenly the tent flap was thrown back, and Nick Janos, gaunt and haggard of feature, stood there with his Colt covering the three men inside. A frosted-steel gleam glittered from the tall puncher's eyes.

"Drop those guns!" he gritted, as both Alicran and Ghee involuntarily reached to their sides.

Obeying terse commands, though reluctantly, the half-breed and the Box X boss drew their weapons slowly, and dropped them to the tent floor. Then they stood up.

"I've come to kill you two lepers," stated Nick grimly. "This ain't a gunfight, but an execution."

"You mean you're goin' to salivate 'em, shore enough?" broke in the cook, a tall, seamed-face range veteran whose name was Con Ridley.

"Jest watch," said Nick. "I'm killin' you, Alicran, for what you done or had done to my partner, Denver."

"Hey, wait a minute," said Ridley, a relieved smile contorting his face. "Killin' is okay with me, but I've been wantin' t' do one thing this long while. This is it!"

And taking up a heavy cast iron skillet from the stove, he raised it before Janos could interpose, and brought it down stunningly upon the back of Alicran's head. The breed pitched forward to his face, either completely unconscious—or dead.

"Now go ahead with your rat-killin', stranger. I've had to take so much from that breed, I like to died. That whack'll help me some in the self-respect, mebbe."

"You goin' to keep out of this?" Nick demanded of the cook.

"Brother, I shore am—lessn you don't do as you say. It might be kinda inconvenient for me if that breed was to wake up."

"Never mind the breed then," said Nick, and turned to Tolman Ghee who was waiting, inching forward, calculating his chances of survival if he sprang. He well knew this was going to be curtains for him or for Nick Janos, though possibly some of the reasons for Janos' hatred might be a bit obscure.

THE CHIEF reason—the one which had brought him to the short-grass country in the first place—was not left obscure. This would have meant a killing in the end. The catastrophe to Denver Bryan had served only to hasten Nick's actions regardless of the effect a showdown might have on the fortunes of others here involved. Nick had completely forgotten, for the time of this killing rage, Steve Lawson, Patsy Keane, and trial scheduled for next day at Lamar.

"They hang hombres for murder in this country," stated Ghee.

"Not always," said Nick evenly. "You ain't hanged even once yet, so far as I can see, an' you shore are plenty guilty. But t' hell with palaver. Four years back you waylaid my uncle, Bert Sievert of Misery Ridge, an' shot him in the back. Then you run off the little jag of cows he owned.

"The coroner's jury didn't hold you then, on account there wasn't any proof. But a fella called Jerry Johnson died four-five months back—oho, you recognize the name? Yeah, Jerry confessed to helpin' you run off the cows after you shot the man who raised me an' was a father to me. So I come here—and now, protect yourself if you can, you bustard!"

Tolman Ghee's visage had faded to yellowish green, mottled by the broken-capillary blotches in the skin of a

heavy drinker. He had shrunk inward, and his eyes had become glassy, as if seeing this gory specter of the past had frightened him as no mere gunfight could.

When he saw the avenger actually toss to one side the Colt which had menaced him, however, and grit out the challenge in words that meant a fight to the death, Ghee's breath caught sharply. He knew himself a terrible rough-and-tumble fighter. Already set to spring into the very teeth of death, he now grinned a little wolfishly, and plunged for Nick Janos arms extended for a grapple about the thighs.

ONE THING Ghee had not recalled—the whiskey. It made him reel slightly, and blurred the keenness of his vision. So—he did not even touch the man coming for him.

Instead of that, a savage one-two punch, straight from the shoulder, rocked him to the left, then to the right, and stopped him in mid stride. But Nick did not halt. He waded straight in, slamming a short uppercut, then sending a flurry of short punches to Ghee's face. The latter's hands clawed helplessly along Nick's shoulders, but that first shocking one-two had done the trick. Half-paralyzed, Ghee could not even side-step when Nick, with a roar of savagery that had in it all the pent-up emotions of a long time, abandoned boxing to leap upon his adversary and bear him straight backward to the dirt floor.

Hands now were clamped on Ghee's throat, pressing in. Janos lifted the man's head and slammed it back time and again. Each time his thumbs sank deeper into the Adam's apple. Ghee's face turned red, purple—and started to turn black. His tongue came out...

And then it was as in a nightmare, Nick felt himself overpowered from behind, and dragged from his prey. Sheriff Yates and four men, among them the rotund but very strong Maxie Moffatt, had entered the tent and grabbed Nick. A moment later the tall man was handcuffed and helpless.

"I didn't know you were still around," said Yates, glaring at Nick. "But I s'pose I got to take you in f'r the trial tomorrow, too. I thought I'd better gather in Alicran an' Ghee tonight. An' it seems I had a damn good hunch. Mebbe there wouldn't of been any trial if I hadn't got here—oh, hell, why did I come?"

Maxie Moffatt had been examining Alicran, and pronounced the breed alive but suffering from concussion.

"Load 'em all on hosses," ordered Yates. "We'll let 'em sleep it off in the juzgado, and be sure we have 'em tomorrow."

So thus it was that a cavalcade started back for town. Yates wondered a little at the listlessness of Nick Janos, who appeared not to care at all what happened to him now.

But the sheriff did not inquire as to the cause of the death fight he had interrupted. Violence of any sort was to be expected at any spread where the owner was fool enough to keep a keg of whiskey in the mess tent or wagon. The only surprising thing to Yates was that any of these men were still alive.

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TWO SMALL happenings occurred before the riders actually got away from the Box X on their way to Lamar.

The first was the appearance at the corral of two horsemen, both of them riders for the outfit. One was stone dead and stiff, tied across his saddle. His name had been Buck Jones, though that fact did not matter. He had been a shifty and furtive fellow, suspected of small connivings and cheatings, even in bunk-

house poker. He would not be mourned greatly by anyone.

The other man who rode in took one look at the group comprising the sheriff and his deputy, the two extra possemen brought with them in case of trouble, Nick Janos with handcuffs on, and both Ghee and Alicran Coombs also most evidently under coercion though not manacled. That one look was enough for the returning Box X rider. He swung his horse, paid no attention to questioning hails, and went from there. He was not heard from again in the short-grass country.

The second happening was of no seeming moment, though it would loom importantly in a little while. The Box X cook took his first chance to whisper to Nick.

"I'm all washed up here, an' leavin'," he rasped hoarsely. "Ghee an' the half-breed 'd kill me shore. But I'll get a gun to you somehow...."

Nick nodded wearily, scarcely paying any attention. He did not care much now what happened to himself. But memory had returned of the trial, and his own part in it. He would carry through just as though Denver Bryan were at his side.

GRUDGINGLY Sheriff Yates let Ghee and Alicran out of their cell two hours before the start of the trial. But he did not concede this much to Nick Janos. In the sheriff's book Nick was more despicable even than the Box X owner and his half-breed lieutenant. Many ranchers at one time or another had been forced to extreme measures to keep their heads above water. But there was no excuse for an able-bodied tophand whom anyone would employ, taking wages for crookedness.

Maxie Moffatt probably had some private doubts behind those shrewd brown eyes of his, for he spent quite a little time trying to get a story out of Nick—and learning only of the death of Denver Bryan, and that Nick held Ghee and Alicran responsible.

Maxie left the cell and went out. He told that story, but no one with the exception of Patsy Keane gave it any credence. Maybe Maxie himself did, though, for he came back just before the time to go to the court with a large package under his arm.

"Some clean duds an' shavin' stuff f'r you," he said. "The clo'es come f'm Miss Keane, an' the razor an' soap f'm Con Ridley, the cook. If you want to take a bath, the's a tub of water drawed in the wash tub in the back room..."

So it was that Nick thankfully performed some fast ablutions, especially glad to shave for the first time in weeks. But he was even more glad to find wrapped in a new undershirt, an ancient but oiled and efficient-looking small revolver—a fully loaded Smith & Wesson of .32-20 caliber. He knew this to be an accurate weapon, though of course not having the real stopping power of a .44 Colt.

He was all ready, long hair combed and clothes clean, looking far different from the ragged, unkempt tramp who had been brought manacled to jail, when Sheriff Yates came to escort him to the courtroom. The sheriff's eyebrows arched, but he said nothing.

AS NICK came into the crowded court, he was greeted by a buzzing of talk, and all eyes turned upon him —most of the faces showing contempt and enmity. Alicran Coombs and Ghee were seated together at the left of the jury box; and their basilisk glares were coldly murderous.

Nick looked at the jury and saw with satisfaction that all members but two were evidently cowmen. Two looked the part of minister and gambler, respectively. The minister actually was Holy Joe Hackett, a defrocked parson who once had divided his time

between the flowing bowl and exhorting a congregation of the Shivering Saints of Sinai, who now owned and ran the Blue Front Emporium in Lamar. The gambler *was* a gambler, Keno Lake of the Squeejaw.

Defying opinion, Patsy Keane arose and came quickly to Nick. "I'm so sorry about your partner!" she said in a low voice. "Maxie Moffatt told me. But—but you still want Steve to plead not guilty? His lawyer is disgusted. Says there's no chance at all..."

"Take my word for it, ma'am. Steve goes free!" said Nick firmly. That was all the conversation possible, as then the black-robed judge came in, and everyone arose, to stand until Judge Usher had seated himself and pounded once with his gavel.

Beside the gavel the judge had brought with him a sawed-off shotgun, which he laid carefully at his elbow—with both barrels pointed to the blank wall at his right.

With a brief warning that he would stand for no contempt of court or violence, Usher nodded to the court clerk, who opened proceedings. For several minutes there was just red tape, with a pale-faced Steve Lawson standing to plead not guilty, and the prosecuting attorney starting in with his witnesses.

He had reached the matter of the hide of the spotted steer which Steve Lawson was alleged to have slaughtered, and Undersheriff Maxie Moffatt came in crouching and dragging a heavy tub on the sanded boards. As he tediously drew it up toward the front, those seated on the aisle saw that it was indeed a spotted steer hide. Then most of them turned away and wrinkled their noses. The fresh hide was fresh no more. In fact, it was decidedly high in odor, despite the water in which it had been soaking for three weeks.

The prosecuting attorney called upon Ghee and Alicran to identify the hide. Ghee did so, and Alicran agreed.

FOR SOME reason, the attorney did not call on Nick Janos for identification. But Nick was on his feet, speaking.

"Your Honor! Your Honor!" he called above the hum of the courtroom. "May I offer an objection and ask one thing?"

"I object!" cried the prosecutor instantly. "This man is a material witness, and will be called in his turn."

"But I have something pertinent as h—uh, I mean very important to say about that hide, before she goes," stated Nick. "May I talk up, judge?"

"Yes, go ahead," said Judge Usher.

"Well-ll," drawled Nick significantly, "that-there hide has been identified as belongin' to the critter Lawson butchered. Mister Ghee and Mister Alicran Coombs are plumb certain about it—and the hide has been in possession of the sheriff all the time.

*"So I want the jury to examine that hide right now! Look at the brand, and then tell me what this dang trial is all about!"*

A sort of gasping hum swept through the court. Through this sounded the thumps of Judge Usher's gavel. But the judge himself was looking intently at Nick, and did not look quite as angry as he might have been. The tumult slowly subsided.

"The jury will have to see the hide, and the brand I suppose," he said at last. "However...well, to save time, Undersheriff, take the thing out of the tub and spread it. After it is once examined we can haul it out of the court I think. The odor...."

"What's all the monkey-business?" roared Ghee. "That's the hide, all right. Lawson shot my beef, and..."

"Order!" cried the judge. "Any more interpolated remarks, Mr. Ghee, and I'll fine you! Spread out that hide!"

So it was that, manifesting extreme

distaste for his job, Moffatt hauled the soaked, heavy hide out of the tub, and laid it on the floor. It certainly was an easily recognizable spotted hide. But when he lifted the right-ribs portion, where both the Hourglass and the Box X branded, he suddenly tensed and stared. Then he lifted the brand and showed it all around the courtroom, first to Ghee and Alicran, then to the judge, finally to the spectators and the jury.

The brand on the steer hide showed plain as an Hourglass! This of course was Steve Lawson's brand. The prisoner in the dock was, in fact, being accused now of killing and butchering his own steer!

Everyone saw the joke instantly. Few cared how it had come about. Perhaps the judge did not really care, for he pounded his gavel but did nothing more than that to stem the tide of roaring ridicule which now broke upon the heads of Ghee and Alicran Coombs.

Over in the first row of spectators Patsy Keane, white-faced, suddenly gasped and understood. She smiled almost unbelievingly at Nick Janos, then jumped to her feet and ran to Steve Lawson in the dock, burying her face against his shoulder.

The Case of the People versus Stephen Lawson was laughed out of court then and there. Probably Ghee and Alicran were the last to understand the significance of what had happened. But suddenly Ghee rose to his feet, roaring his wrath. His face was purpling as he yelled at Judge Usher. Alicran Coombs had another idea. He started for the doorway, crowding back of the standees.

Ghee paid no attention to the gavel.

"It's a trick! A damn trick!" he yelled furiously. "An' you're the jigger who done it!" he suddenly accused, swinging around to confront his deadly enemy, Nick Janos.

Nick had been waiting for this, though he had not really expected the showdown until court was adjourned. But when the maddened rancher jerked out his Colt, Nick drew flashingly and shot the little Smith & Wesson deliberately—and with deadly aim.

Ghee never fired. He sagged and crumpled like a suit of clothes falling from a hangar, two tiny but deadly messengers of death through his heart.

Up there Judge Usher pounded his gavel, shouting that the case was dismissed, and the prisoner free, and then spreading his arms helplessly yelled that court was adjourned...

IT WAS FOUR days later, following the wedding of Patsy Keane and Steve Lawson. Nick Janos had stayed on to attend, though his heart was not in it any more. He had been riding daily, looking for trace of Alicran Coombs, who had escaped from the courtroom and ridden away. It seemed probable, though, that the half-breed had gone back to Mexico.

The bride and groom came out to Nick, waiting outside.

"We just simply don't know how to thank you," said Lawson simply. But Patsy came right up, threw her arms around Nick's neck, and kissed him.

"Mr. Wambsganss was glad to sell that old brand to us," she said. "So now—well, if there are any Flat Diamonds on the range—"

"I figure there are about two hundred. Denver and I—" said Nick, and stopped, deep pain making his eyes fill. He looked away.

"You never told us how that brand business was worked," said Lawson, lowering his voice. Not being especially sensitive toward other men's feelings, the yellowhead missed the grief in Nick's face now.

"Well, don't ever tell Yates," said Nick shrugging. Then he related how he had combed the breaks, searching for a yearling steer that had escaped branding thus far, and which looked

something like the spotted one Lawson had butchered.

"I reckon we dug up seven-eight hundred, afore we found an unbranded one that was spotted right," he concluded. "Once we had the hide, a-course, the rest was simple. Denver shot off his six-gun near the sheriff's office where the hide was. While the sheriff went to see what was goin' on, I substituted the hides. But keep that to yourself. I don't hone for a spell in prison right now."

# Bad Broncs From Oregon

Special Feature by BRETT AUSTIN

THE OREGON bronc broke into bucking the minute the cowpuncher got into saddle. Forelegs stiff as pokers, he hogged into it, bucking through the cow-camp, scattering cowboys and horses and bucking over bed-rolls, for the cowpunchers were just breaking camp, heading the trailherd east toward Montana Territory.

"Git thet bronc outa here!" the cook screamed. Dust was getting all over his utensils.

Just as the bronc cleared camp, he threw his rider; then he bucked on with an empty-saddle, hind legs kicking at the back cinch on the Miles City double-rigged saddle. A cowboy spurred forward and caught the loose hackamore rope, taking his dallies around his saddle-horn to pull the bronc to a jarring stop.

The cook was screaming bloody-murder. "Ah, shut up, Cookie!" the wagon-boss ordered. "You're still alive, you fool!" He turned to the thrown cowpuncher, who was bowlegging his way back to camp, a grin on his sun-blistered face. "Too much hoss for you, Jimmy?"

Jimmy grinned crookedly. "He can't buck hard, boss. I never figgered he would buck, so I wasn't on guard; never got a good seat in my saddle. I thought we bought Oregon hosses what was broke to ride gentle?"

"He's all right. That double-rigged saddle got him; he doesn't like that back cinch. Them Oregon punchers broke him usin' single-rigged saddles with one cinch. That last cinch, loose like that back on his belly, makes him mad."

The horse was led back. This time the range-boss held him by the hackamore while Jimmy mounted, got both boots in stirrups, and got a firm saddle.

"Don't let him have his head," the boss warned. "Hoss can't buck if a man controls his head. Don't let him buck if you can help it. He's a good cuttin' hoss, an' we don't want him to get the buckin' habit."

This time the bronc kicked once or twice at the back cinch, slashing out with a hind leg, and then he settled down.

"That cinch is what was botherin' him," the wagon-boss said.

The cook was loading his cooking implements into his wagon. "He had no call to buck him right through camp, though."

"Oh, shut up!"

MANY PEOPLE believe that when the cattle ranges of Montana and Wyoming were opened to settlement, all the cattle destined to stock that huge range came from Texas and the south. This is not true; many came from Oregon. These cattle were raised by settlers who had come to the West Coast over the old Oregon Trail. Their cattle had multiplied fast on the

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# DEAD MAN'S DOLLAR

by Edwin Booth

**"All I guarantee is that you'll find money on this spot I indicate — and I'll show you the spot for two thousand dollars!"**

CLEM THOMAS stopped outside the livery stable archway and let his watchful gaze swing back and forth between the two hotels which faced each other across the darkened street. To his right, the *Eagle's Nest* was a blaze of lights, and several horses stood hip-shot along its hitch-rail. Directly opposite, the Traveller's Hotel was dark except for the faint yellow glow of a single coal-oil lamp in the lobby. Clem shouldered his warbag and headed for the latter. After riding all the way from Yuma since morning, he was more interested in rest than in bright lights and excitement.

"I wouldn't go in there, was I you."

Clem took his foot off the bottom step and turned to face the speaker, who had moved out of the shadow of a cottonwood tree. The man had placed himself between Clem and the lights of the *Eagle's Nest,* so that he was only a silhouette, but it was plain that he was big—almost as tall as Clem, and a good deal broader. Clem leaned his warbag against the edge of the steps.

"Any special reason?" he asked quietly. It was his first visit to the town of Cottonwood Springs, and he was more puzzled than angry.

"Dutch wouldn't like it," the man said. He came a step closer, his arms a little bent at the elbows.

"So?" Clem had never heard of anyone named Dutch. He turned his back and reached down to grab hold of the rope around his warbag, saying over his shoulder, "Well, tell Dutch he can sleep where he wants to and I'll do the same."

"Why you...!" The man took a quick step forward and grabbed Clem's right shoulder in his left hand.

Clem released the rope and whirled to slam his left fist into the man's mouth, knocking him backwards on the seat of his pants in the middle of the road. At the same time his right hand flipped the gun out of his holster. "While you're about it," he said flatly, "Tell Dutch—whoever he is—that I'm fed up with taking orders. Now beat it!"

The man got to his feet slowly. "Dutch ain't going to like this." He turned toward the *Eagle's Nest,* and

An explosion rocked the saloon.

Clem had a brief glimpse of a cruel profile marked by a broken nose before the man pushed through the batwing doors of the hotel's barroom and disappeared.

Clem bent down and picked up his warbag, not at all pleased with the way things were going. After a year behind the walls of the state penitentiary, all he wanted was a chance to rest and soak up some sunshine, then to get a decent job among honest men. He mounted the steps and entered the hotel.

The Traveller's lobby was a big room with no carpet and very little furniture. Clem headed for the desk, where an oil lamp glowed dimly, his bootheels making a racket on the bare floorboards. A door opened at the far side of the room, and a man stepped into the light, a shotgun cradled across his left arm.

He looked at Clem a minute, then moved behind the desk and turned up the lamp. "Don't pay any attention to the gun," he said. "I heard the fuss, and thought it might end up in here." His voice was tinged with humor, and the brighter light revealed that he was a man of perhaps twenty-five, a few years younger than Clem, and considerably smaller. He leaned the shotgun against the wall and smiled at Clem across the desk.

CLEM GRINNED back at him. "Some one around here seems to object to you being in business. The fuss you heard was a feller trying to persuade me not to come in."

"I guessed as much." The young

man coughed twice, and touched a handkerchief to his lips. "Probably it was Ace Gruller who warned you—he's one of Dutch Middlestadt's gunmen. They do about as they please since they chased our last marshal out of town." He put the handkerchief back in his pocket and looked at Clem thoughtfully. "Maybe you'd be smart to take his advice—everyone else does."

"I don't generally take advice from a man I've never met." Clem reached in his pocket and tossed a silver dollar on the desk. "I reckon you've got a room I can use."

The young man grinned. "Take your choice, stranger. Take the whole upstairs if you want it." He extended his right hand. "My name is Fowler, Danny Fowler. Welcome to Cottonwood Springs."

"Clem Thomas." Clem took the young man's thin hand in his own strong fingers, forgetting for the moment to go easy on the grip. He felt the younger man wince, and was instantly sorry.

"It's all right." Danny withdrew his hand and rubbed it against his pants leg. He smiled ruefully. "I'm not as rugged as you Westerners, especially since I've been sick." He flexed his fingers carefully. "Well, I hope you get a good night's sleep."

"Thanks." Clem picked up his warbag and ascended the steps to the second floor. At the top of the stairway he paused to strike a match on the sole of his boot, noticing as he did that the hotelkeeper was leaning against the desk, a haggard look on his face. He moved on down the hallway then, and entered the last room on the left, where he touched the dying match flame to a candle. The candle reluctantly came alive, revealing a plain, clean room, containing a sagging bed and a washstand on which a porcelain pitcher sat in a tin basin.

There were two windows, one on the back of the building, and one on the side. Clem dumped his warbag in the corner of the room, tugged off his boots, and stripped to his underwear. He blew out the candle and stretched out on the bed, sucking in great draughts of cool, pine-scented air. Not much like the fetid atmosphere of the prison, he thought, as his taut muscles began to relax. Then he remembered Ace Gruller's warning, and his lips twisted into an ironic grin. The air might be different, but there was the same kind of men. He reached out to make sure that his sixgun was hanging in easy reach, and fell asleep.

Being a light sleeper, Clem awoke almost as soon as the flames started to crackle. He lay motionless only long enough to identify the sound, then rolled out of bed and jerked on his pants. There was a red glow beneath his window, and the smell of smoke. He slapped his gunbelt around his waist and ran out into the hall. Below him, he heard bare feet racing across the lobby. He took the steps three at a time and charged across the lobby and out onto the porch.

Several men stood on the other side of the street watching, but none of them gave any indication of intending to take a hand. "Get some water!" Clem yelled. The men didn't move, and Clem cursed under his breath. He rounded the corner of the hotel and saw Danny Fowler beating at the flames with a gunnysack. Even from this distance he could hear Danny's rasping breath. He ran over and snatched the sack out of Danny's hand.

"Let me handle it." He slashed at the flames with the sack, and soon had them under control. Behind him, Danny was coughing spasmodically. Still no one arrived to give a hand. Clem stomped out the last of the embers and tossed the sack onto the dirt, then took Danny's arm and guided him back around the hotel and into the lobby.

"Thanks." Danny grinned at him weakly. "I was afraid they'd try some-

thing like this, but I didn't know how to stop them." He pocketed his handkerchief and looked up a little defiantly. "Don't pay any attention to the way I cough. I'm a dozen times better than I was when I came out here six months ago."

"Sure you are." Clem automatically reached for his tobacco, then realized that he wasn't wearing a shirt. He frowned at Danny across the desk. "If you've just been here six months, how-come you've got this feller Dutch so set against you?"

DANNY SUCKED in a careful breath. "There's nothing personal about it. It's just that Dutch doesn't like competition." He looked up at Clem thoughtfully. "You wouldn't know it, but I bought this place from Dutch—paid him every cent I had in the world. It seemed like a good proposition at the time, since I was familiar with running a hotel. What I didn't know was that Dutch owned Cassidy's Saloon across the street, and was planning on adding some rooms and making it into a hotel."

"Cassidy's?" Clem's interest quickened. He had known a man at Yuma by the name of Cassidy—a lifer."

"You've probably heard of him. He got caught after holding up the Wells-Fargo office over at Phoenix. In fact I think they captured him right across the street in his saloon, but that was before I was around. Anyway, with Dutch's men scaring my guests away, it looks as if I might as well give up. Maybe Dutch might give me a few dollars and buy the place back."

Clem looked at him, feeling sorry for the man, but thinking more about the prisoner named Cassidy. "It sort of looks that way," he agreed. He shook his head. "Well, I'm no better than the others. I can't afford to stay over here and maybe get a bullet in my back. I reckon I'll just have to move across to the Eagle's Nest."

Danny nodded grimly. "Can't say as I blame you, Mr. Thomas. It isn't your fight." He forced a grin. "Thanks anyway for what you did. Here's your dollar back."

Clem started to refuse, but changed his mind and took the dollar. He wanted to offer some encouragement, but hardened his heart. If any of Dutch's men happened to be eavesdropping at one of the windows, they'd get the idea that he was on Danny's side. He pocketed the dollar and went back upstairs for his gear. When he came down, Danny had gone back into his room.

Most of the horses were gone from the hitchrail in front of the Eagle's Nest, but there was still a goodly crowd of patrons in the saloon. A piano jangled unmusically, and the gruff rumble of men's talk was punctuated with the shrill voices of women. A faro game was going full blast, and five men were hunched around a poker table. One of these was the broken-nosed man Danny had called Ace Gruller. Clem noticed with satisfaction that his lips were puffed out of shape. He crossed to the bar and laid a fifty-cent piece on the polished wood. "Whiskey," he said.

The bartender swept the coin into his hand and reached for a bottle. As he poured some of the contents into a glass, Clem faced the backbar. In the mirror he saw Ace Gruller look up idly from the poker table, then come instantly alert as he spotted Clem at the bar. Ace pushed back his chair and got to his feet, his hand falling to his six-gun. He said something out of the corner of his mouth to another poker player, then moved away from the table and came toward the bar.

Clem picked up the glass of whiskey and rotated it in his fingers, giving no sign that he noticed the gunman's approach. He tossed off the drink and reached for the bottle.

"You shoulda stayed away from here, stranger." Ace's voice revealed

his satisfaction at this unexpected chance to get even.

"You speaking to me?" Clem started to turn slowly, then finished the move with lightning speed, slamming the half-filled whiskey bottle into Ace's face. The glass shattered, and Ace howled. He tried to bring his gun into line, but Clem's hand closed around his wrist and wrenched it backwards. Blood streamed off Ace's face and soaked his shirt. He lashed out with his booted foot. Clem took advantage of the chance to kick Ace's other foot out from under him. The big man crashed to the floor with Clem on top of him. Clem put more pressure on the wrist, and the gun dropped from his fingers. Clem kicked it into the corner and stood up. He turned to find a sawed-off shotgun staring at him across the bar. At the same time, a door behind the bar opened, and a flashily dressed man stepped into the room.

"What's going on here?" he demanded angrily. "By gawd, can't I leave this place ten minutes without...?" He saw Clem and frowned. "Who the hell are you, mister?"

CLEM STARED at him a moment without speaking, then moved over to the bar and let his frosty gaze focus on the eyes of the bartender. "Put up that scattergun, mister, or so help me..."

The bartender licked his lips. It was obvious that he had never been threatened by a man whose belly was in line with his shotgun. He flashed a quick look at the man who had come out of the office. While his attention was temporarily diverted, Clem reached out and forced the muzzle of the shotgun upward. The gun went off, and glass flew from a hanging lamp. Clem's six-gun was aimed across the bar now, and the bartender released his hold on the shotgun and backed away.

Clem turned his attention to the newcomer. "Are you Dutch?"

The flashily dressed man nodded. His eyes had narrowed to slits, and his hands hung close to his two pistols.

Clem grinned. "Then you'd better teach your dogs not to bark at strangers." He holstered his gun. "I'm a friend of Cassidy's. Does that mean anything?"

"Cassidy's!" Dutch's eyes widened. "You lie, mister! Cassidy don't have any friends."

Clem's grin disappeared. Behind him, the room had become deathly quiet. Dutch was watching him suspiciously, ready to signal some of his men. Clem took a step toward the end of the bar. "Mister, you're the only man who ever called me a liar and lived this long. Maybe I'm getting soft." He twisted his lips into a grin. "Anyway, where Cassidy is now, he's got to make friends. Besides, what's he got to lose?"

Dutch thought it over, and nodded. "It figgers." He moved away from the office, and let his eyes travel up and down Clem's form. "Come to think of it, you do look sort of pale. You been in the pen?"

"I ain't been in a coal mine." Clem let his hand drop away from his gun, and turned to sweep the room with his gaze. The others were watching the scene curiously. He turned back toward Dutch. "If you're interested, let's talk. Otherwise, I'll find somebody who *is*."

"Come on in my office." Dutch moved aside and motioned for Clem to pass him. Clem stepped into the office and crossed the room to sit down in a straight-backed chair. Dutch motioned to somebody in the barroom, then followed Clem into the office. After a moment Ace Gruller and a smaller man entered the room.

"Shut the door."

Dutch sat down behind a scarred desk and waited for the door to be shut, then turned to face Clem. "All right, friend, we'll see how much truth

there is in this story. First of all, what does Cassidy look like?"

Clem glanced across at Ace Gruller, noting the fury in his eyes. The smaller man's eyes showed no emotion at all, but his fingers kept toying with the grips of a six-gun swung low on his leg. A gunslinger if Clem had ever seen one. He turned his look toward the man behind the desk.

"Cassidy? I'd say he was about five feet nine. Dark hair, which he parts in the middle. Lots of fur on his chest and arms, and he's got a birthmark just above the left elbow, and a knife scar under his chin." He grinned. "Reckon his razor slipped."

Dutch nodded. "That's Cassidy, all right." He tilted back in his chair and took a cigar out of his vest pocket, lighting it with painstaking deliberation. When it was lit he glanced around the room, then back at Clem. "All right, stranger. What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't say." Clem reached for his tobacco and began fashioning a cigaret. "You can call me Clem, if you need a name." He didn't fail to notice that the little gunman was watching Dutch closely, as though waiting for a signal.

"Well then, Clem," Dutch said. "What makes you think I'd be interested in you knowing Cassidy?"

CLEM BLEW a cloud of smoke at the ceiling. "A little matter of that money he got from the last job he pulled. Maybe you'd like to know where it's hidden."

"Maybe I would." Dutch was trying hard to be nonchalant, but a muscle started twitching in his cheek. "If you know, suppose you tell me."

"Do I look like a fool?" Clem dropped the cigaret on the floor and ground it out with his heel. "That information is worth a lot of money to a lot of people. I ain't liable to tell you for nothing."

It might have been that Dutch's eyelid flickered, but Clem couldn't be sure. At any rate, the little gunman's Colt was out of its holster. The gunman spoke softly. "Something tells me you will, Clem. Call it a hunch if you like." He crossed the room and lifted Clem's gun out of the holster, then backed away far enough to be out of reach. "What'll I do, boss? Plug him?"

"Not yet!" Dutch's answer was sharp. "Not 'til he talks." He got out of his chair and came over to stare down at Clem, who had not risen out of his seat.

"All right, Clem. You know Cassidy all right, and I believe your story about being at Yuma with him. Chances are he *did* talk, being as he's in for life. Likely you promised to spring him out of there if he'd tell you about the money, and he might've been desperate enough to believe it." He lowered his head between his shoulders. "But I ain't in the spot Cassidy was, so you'd better start talkin'!"

Clem shook his head. "Not for free, Dutch."

Dutch's big fist lashed out and caught Clem on the side of the jaw, knocking him out of the chair. Clem whirled to his feet, but the little gunman's voice said icily, "Don't give me no excuse, stranger. There's a lot of places I can shoot without killing you."

Clem let his hands drop to his sides. "You won't find out this way," he said. "You're just wasting your time."

"We'll see." Dutch backed off and motioned to Ace Gruller. "This is more in your line, Ace. Just see to it you don't kill him."

"Sure, boss." Ace came across the room, cracking his knuckles. He stared at Clem as though savoring what was to come, and licked his puffy lips with the end of his tongue. "All right, pilgrim, I've been waiting for this!" He threw a wicked left hook that caught Clem on the point of the chin, then followed with a haymaker which buried itself in the pit of Clem's stomach.

Clem rocked helplessly under the attack, conscious of the gun at his back. His breath wheezed out and he sagged to his knees. Ace's clubbed fists crashed down on his head, and he fell on his face.

"That's enough, Ace." Clem was dimly aware that Dutch had moved in between him and his assailant. He tried to get up, but couldn't make it. Blood was streaming from a cut on his chin, and his head throbbed. Through the muddle of his thoughts he remembered drunkenly how he had ridden into town only a few hours before, expecting only to get a good night's rest and then look for a job. Compared to this, Yuma had been a picnic. He rolled his head out of the blood, and his mind began to function. He struggled painfully to his hands and knees, then staggered to his feet, bracing them far apart. Dutch was frowning at him through the haze.

Clem managed a grin. "Like I told you, Dutch, you're wasting your time. You'll never find out this way." He wiped blood from his face.

DUTCH SHOOK his head and went behind the desk to sit down. "All right, Clem," he said defeatedly. "What's your price? I'll cut you in for a fourth, providing we find it where you say it is."

"No deal." Clem's strength was returning, but he was glad to sit down. He focused his eyes on Dutch, his vision once more normal. "All I can tell you is where to look. I have no way of knowing how much you'll find. If you want anything from me, you're going to have to pay me off in cold cash. That's the only way I'll operate."

"Damn it man, what's your price?" Dutch leaned across the desk, his face red with anger.

"I'll have to think about it." Clem picked up his tobacco sack off the floor and started rolling a cigaret. "Leave me alone for a few minutes and I'll make you a proposition. I ain't a fast thinkier."

Dutch frowned a moment, then shrugged. "All right. Only don't get the idea you'll run out on us. There's only one door to this room, and the windows are barred."

Clem grinned. "After the trouble I took to get here, I ain't liable to leave in a hurry." He watched them file out of the room, and waited for the door to close behind them. What Dutch had said about the windows was probably true, or if it wasn't, Dutch would set men to watch outside.

He got to his feet and stretched his arms over his head, straightening out his kinked muscles. From Dutch's expression, he was wild to learn the secret of Cassidy's money. Likely he'd be willing to pay plenty, but how much? Clem reached in his pocket and took out a single silver dollar, which he tossed idly in his hand. A sudden thought struck him, and he got down on his knees and moved around until he found a crack between two floor boards. He slipped the dollar into the crack and forced it down with the blade of his pocket knife. It dropped noiselessly out of sight, and he got to his feet and went over to open the door. Dutch was watching him suspiciously from a few feet away, and the little gunman had his hand on his gun.

"Come back in; I've made up my mind."

They followed him into the room, and he waited until the door was closed. It bothered him that Ace hadn't returned, but that was something he couldn't help. He faced Dutch. "My price is two thousand dollars."

Dutch's relief was poorly concealed. "All right, Clem. That's not too much. Where is it?"

"Not so fast." Clem shook his head. "There's one or two things we've got to straighten out before we settle. For all I know, you may have someone waiting out in front to take the money away from me. I don't go for a deal like that." He nodded toward the gun-

man. "I'm going to have to have my gun back first."

"Give him his gun," Dutch said impatiently. "Now what?"

Clem took the gun and checked the loads. He pointed the gun at the floor and pulled the trigger.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Dutch demanded furiously.

The door burst open, and Ace Gruller stuck his head into the room. He had his gun fisted.

"Come in, Ace," Clem said. "I figured that would bring you." He holstered his gun. "All right, Dutch; now that we're all together we can talk business." He moved over by the desk, where all three men would be where he could watch them. "You've got to understand this—I ain't saying how much money you're going to find. Cassidy never told me that. All I can do is tell you where to look, and I'll guarantee you'll find money."

Dutch's impatience was making him sweat. "Get on with it, Clem. I ain't askin' for no bill of sale. Where is it?"

"First let's see the two thousand dollars."

DUTCH HESITATED only a moment, then turned to work the combination of a small safe. He seemed less reluctant than a man of his kind might normally be, and Clem's suspicions were multiplied.

Dutch turned away from the safe and tossed a bundle of currency on the desk. "There it is; now tell me about the money."

Clem picked up the bundle and shoved it in his pocket. If his suspicions were right, Dutch wouldn't bother to short-change him. He crossed over to the door, and took the key out of the lock. "I just want to be sure I get out of here alive." He put his hand on the doorknob and opened the door a crack. The three men in the room were watching him tensely.

"You're sitting on it," he said suddenly. "From what I know, there's money right under this hotel." He yanked open the door and stepped out into the barroom, inserting the key and locking the door behind him. The bartender gave him an odd look, but didn't reach for his shotgun. Clem crossed the room and stepped out into the night air. In spite of the coolness, there were beads of sweat on his face. Behind him he heard loud hammering as the three men tried to attract attention. He raced across the street and into the Traveller's Hotel.

Danny Fowler came out of his room, the shotgun again in his hand. He saw Clem and stopped, surprise etching his face.

Clem crossed over to face him. "I decided to come back," he said. "They treated me worse over there." He touched a hand to his swollen jaw. "Any objections?"

Danny shook his head. "I haven't forgotten how you helped put out that fire. You're welcome anytime." He set the shotgun against the desk.

"Is that thing loaded?" Clem asked.

Danny nodded.

"Then bring it along and come over here to the window. We're liable to see some excitement."

"You think they'll come over after you?"

"They'll be too busy to worry about me," Clem said. "For a while, at least." He unholstered his six-gun and replaced the loads. There was no telling what the little gunman might've done to it while it was in his hands. With that job completed, he pulled a chair over by the window and sat down. "Might as well make ourselves comfortable," he said. "This might take a while."

Danny pulled a chair up beside him. "What's supposed to happen?"

Clem pointed out the window. Already there was unusual activity at the Eagle's Nest. Ace Gruller came rushing through the batwings and headed down the street at a lumbering trot.

Almost immediately the saloon's patrons began erupting through the swinging doors. Dutch Middlestadt stood in the doorway behind them. "The place is closed, men," he said loudly. "'Til further notice." He looked down the street the way Ace had gone, then went back into the saloon. In a moment Ace came back up the street carrying a pick and two shovels. He plunged into the *Eagle's Nest* without a single glance at the other hotel. After a bit there was the sound of hammering, and lights began to come on in the front bedrooms as the tenants were awakened.

Danny turned to look at Clem in the dim light. "I don't get it, Mr. Thomas. What did you do over there?"

Clem chuckled. "The main thing I did was take a beating." He turned to face Danny. "How much money do you figure you've lost here on account of Dutch?"

Danny thought about it. "I don't know. Maybe fifteen hundred dollars, plus what I'll lose when I abandon the building. Why?"

"Just curious." Clem turned back toward the window. Half-dressed hotel guests were coming out into the street, looking bewildered. One of them asked loudly, "What is it—a fire?"

"Don't ask me," another voice answered. "He just told us to get out."

The bartender came out the door and ran around behind the saloon. When he came back he had a ten foot piece of two by six. He raced back inside, and soon there was the noise of timber being wrenched loose.

Danny got up and peered through the window. "Whatever they're doing, couldn't it wait 'til morning?"

"Not with Dutch," Clem said somberly. "He's as bad right now as any man trying to be first to reach a gold strike." He got up and joined Danny at the window. "He's liable to go crazy if he don't find something pretty quick."

BY NOW, THE whole town was aroused. Quite a number of men, and a few women, stood safely back out of danger and watched the hotel. Some of the men had pulled their pants on over their nightshirts, but none of them had forgotten to wear their guns. It was too dark to read their expressions, but Clem could imagine what they were saying.

The bartender had started dragging shattered planks out through the batwings and dumping them in the street. As he turned to go back for more, Ace shoved his head through the doorway. "It's here, all right!" he yelled. "The boss just found a silver dollar that must've dropped out of one of the sacks."

The bartender dropped his load of lumber and pounded across the sidewalk and into the saloon. Presently he came running out again and ran down the street to the hardware store. He banged on the door until a light showed and the door opened, then pushed his way inside. There was the sound of an argument, then he came out carrying a wooden box. He handled it gingerly as he went back into the saloon.

Clem stiffened. "Good Lord! They're fixing to use dynamite! They're liable to blow up the whole town!" He raced out into the street, but before he could reach the saloon Ace Gruller appeared in the batwings with a gun in his hand.

"Stay back!" he shouted. "Nobody's coming in here!" It was evident that he didn't recognize Clem or he would have shot. Clem backed into the shadows where he wouldn't be such a good target.

"Tell the crazy fool to stop," he yelled. "There's no money in there!"

Ace laughed harshly. "The hell there ain't! We already found a dollar Cassidy dropped." Suddenly he was shoved from behind, and stumbled across the sidewalk. His toe caught on a loose board, and he fell on his face. Dutch and the bartender ran off and left him.

Clem wondered what had happened to the little gunman. Before he came to any conclusion, there was a terrific explosion inside the saloon. The front wall bulged, seemed to stay in place for a moment, then collapsed, letting the whole second floor drop. Ace was buried in a mass of shattered timbers. Fires started up in a dozen places as lamps were torn loose from their fastenings. In a matter of moments the whole pile was an inferno.

Clem saw the last of it as he got to his feet after being thrown to the floor by the force of the blast. He turned to see Danny picking himself up, apparently unhurt. Clem stepped out onto the porch and looked around at the circle of stunned faces, now clearly visible in the glare of the fire. He saw Dutch Middlestadt staring at the fire in fascination. Then the saloonman turned and moved over beside him. Strangely, he didn't seem worried. In fact he was grinning.

"Let it burn," he said, holding his voice low enough so that the others couldn't hear. "I won't need a hotel after tonight. Just as soon as them ashes cool, I'll be rich." He stared at Clem, and his grin widened. "You crazy tinhorn; didn't you know Cassidy got close to thirty thousand that time? You could've held out for at least ten!" He winked. "And you don't dare give me away, or you'll find yourself back in Yuma!"

Clem stared at the man. "It was thirty-one thousand," he said. "I ought to know—I helped count it."

IT TOOK a minute for Dutch to comprehend. His jaw sagged. "You? You helped count that money? Then you knew how much there was all the time. Howcome you told me for just two thousand dollars?"

Clem grinned. "Because it isn't under your hotel, Dutch. It's nowhere near here."

"But you said..."

"I didn't promise a thing. All I did was guarantee that you'd find money under there, and you did." He pointed at the silver dollar. "That's money, ain't it?"

"Why, you dirty, double-crossing...!" Dutch grabbed for his gun, but Clem beat him to the draw. Dutch staggered backward and fell at the edge of the fire, still clutching the dollar. A spark dropped on his face, but he was beyond feeling it.

Clem turned and saw Danny Fowler standing behind him, looking puzzled.

"You tricked him," Danny said woodenly. "You made him wreck his own building, and there was nothing..."

Clem laid a hand on the young man's shoulder. "He tricked himself, Danny. I didn't promise him a thing." He put his hand in his pocket. "By the way, here's enough money to cover your losses to date. I don't reckon you'll have to sell, now that you've got no competition."

Danny looked at the money and shook his head. "I can't take stolen money, Mr. Thomas."

"It ain't stolen." Clem forced the money into Danny's hands. "I earned every cent of it, believe me." He touched his fingers to his jaw.

Someone went galloping past on a horse, and Clem saw that it was the bartender. The horse thundered off into the night. Noise of its passage seemed to arouse the onlookers, and several of the men moved over to face Clem. One of them seemed to be the spokesman. He squinted up at Clem for some time, then held out his hand.

"I don't know who you are, stranger, but the town owes you a vote of thanks. Now maybe we can live without being afraid every time we step outside our houses."

Clem looked around at the circle of faces, all of them friendly. He glanced down at the man's hand. "Nobody owes me a thing," he said. "Besides,

I didn't do anything—Dutch did it himself."

"Like blazes he did!" one of the men said bluntly. "By grab, if we'd had a man like you for marshal, Dutch never would've taken over." He frowned. "Say—I don't suppose there's any chance you'd take the job?"

Clem shook his head. "You ought to find out something about me before you offer me a job. I'm a stranger in Cottonwood Springs."

Danny moved up to lay a hand on Clem's arm. He looked around at the group of citizens. "I guess what he's thinking about, men, is that he just got out of Yuma." He tightened his grip on Clem's arm. "As far as I'm concerned, I say we forget his past. Anybody who will take the beating he did, and then turn over this much money to a stranger—he's good enough for me."

The group exchanged glances, and several of them nodded. Clem couldn't blame them for seeming a little hesitant. After all, they hadn't even found out why he had been in Yuma. Nevertheless, the spokesman put out his hand again.

"I reckon Danny said what we're all thinking, stranger. The job's yours if you want it."

Clem took the hand in his own firm grip. A little smile twisted the corners of his mouth. "Then I guess I'm your man," he said. "There's just one thing, and I hope it won't be a disappointment." He loosened the man's hand, and laid his own on Danny's shoulder.

"In all the excitement, I reckon Danny didn't get around to finding out all about me. The truth is..." His grin widened. "The truth is, gentlemen, I wasn't in Yuma for what you think—I was a guard. That's how I got to know Cassidy, and that's how I got to count his loot, when it was found and brought to the penitentiary to be checked."

There was a moment of dead silence, then somebody laughed. Men started clapping Clem on the back and shaking his hand. He turned away in embarrassment and saw Danny looking at him proudly, and he pulled away from the others.

"About that room, Danny—is it still for rent?"

Danny nodded. "Any time, Mr. Thomas."

"Good." Clem walked over and reached down to take the dollar out of Dutch's outstretched hand. He handed it to Danny.

"In that case, here's your dollar again. I reckon you might say it bought your hotel back."

★

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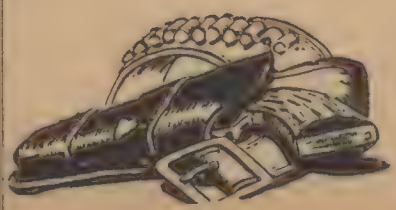

**DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN**

*Now on sale*

# YOU CAN'T WASH OFF MY WAR PAINT

by Lee Thomas

BLACKFEET braves gathered around the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The men had given them food and trinkets—beads and gaudy tin toys—as peace tokens. The Blackfeet were not as much interested in the foofaraws as they were in a certain member of the exploring party there in that year of 1805.

"These Indians are peaceful enough," a man said, "but they don't seem interested in trinkets, like the Mandans and the Crows. They gather in small bunches and look at York."

York was the only Negro in the expedition. He had gone along as Captain Clark's "valet." Clark referred to him jokingly as his "maid." And quite a maid he was—six-foot four, husky as they make them, and tough as old buffalo-hide after his trek halfways across the North American Continent.

The man to whom the statement was made showed a smile. "Don't you know what is wrong with them, Joe?"

"They sure act queer. They don't wanna fight. They're all decked out in war-paint an' them feather head-dresses, but they just stand and gawk at that colored man."

"They think York is a white man dyed black. They think that is his war paint. That's why they gawk at him thataway."

"Well, I'll be horn-swoggled!"

And the Blackfeet were interested in York because of his color. They had seen white men before—trappers had been in their country for many years—but this was the first black man they had ever seen.

The Mandans, of course, had seen Negroes before, for they were far to the east, along the Missouri River in what is South and North Dakota, and many Negroes served in the U. S. Cavalry. But the Blackfeet, locked in the great Rocky Mountain area, had never heard of a black man before, and the husky York was indeed very interesting to them.

York was a good-natured man who had spent most of his life with Captain Clark. He especially liked to take care of Sacagawea's little baby, Baptiste Chaboneau, who crossed the continent from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean strapped to his mother's back. Sacagawea was the guide for the expedition, and her baby, of course, was showered with attention; being the only baby in the group, and York, loving children, probably doted on the child more than did any other male in the organization.

The expedition had found Sacagawea in the Mandan camp near what is now

Bismark, North Dakota. By birth the young woman was a Shoshone; she had been kidnapped when five years old by the Mandans and taken to the eastern prairies. She had offered to guide the expedition across the Rockies to her old home in the Shoshone country, and her husband, Toussaint Chaboneau, a half-breed trapper, also went along, working for Lewis and Clark.

The redskins were friendly because the white-men were a novelty and had not as yet had a chance to rob and steal and kill. Although interested in the white members of the expedition, their attention was raptly fastened on the two-hundred and forty pound York, who took it all in good-natured stride.

FINALLY, one day an Indian approached Captain Clark and pointed at York and told him, in sign language, that York had "war-paint" on. Clark assured the brave, also in sign language, that York was naturally black and that his black skin was not originally white and that the Negro had not dyed himself. At this point, Sacagawea interpreted the Indian tongue, and sign-language was not used, but the brave still insisted that York used "war paint."

"They want to take him to the river and give him a bath," Sacagawea said, glancing anxiously at the Negro.

York grinned widely. "So that is what they want, huh? Well, tell them I'll be willing."

Clark asked, "You really want to go through with that, York?"

"Sure. I have nothing to lose."

So York went to the river with the redskins, who were grinning widely. They'd wash this black man and see for themselves that he turned white! Or maybe he was a redskin himself, who had dyed himself black.

York obligingly stripped off his buckskins and they all waded into the river, where the Indians got mud and water and proceeded to scrub the Negro. But despite their scrubbing, York still remained black.

"All you're doin' is shining me up a little," York said, and laughed loudly.

When the group came back from the river everybody was laughing, redskins and the black man. The redskins were still puzzled as to how anybody could be born black, but they were satisfied at long last that York really was black of skin.

"He's black," one said, in sign language, the wonder of it still in his dark eyes. "First time I ever knew man was born black."

York grinned. "Now that all you people are satisfied, I got a chore to do. That chore is to go with these people until we reach the Pacific Ocean."

Which he did.

★

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Clint remembered what his father had had to take . . .

# OUT OF THE BACKTRAIL

by Jim Brewer

**Heavy in Clint Brazos' heart was the fear that someone would recognize him as the son of a man who'd been branded yellow.**

THE ONLY duty Clint Brazos disliked about his job as marshal was meeting the stage as it arrived every day. There was always the possibility of seeing someone who

would recognize him, and the prospect seemed to grow more terrifying with the passage of time. That was why he always leaned against the front of the Overland Station with his hat low over his eyes as the stage braked to a stop.

This day there were three passengers. They stepped onto the plank sidewalk and looked up and down the dusty street. Seeing nothing unusual in the false-fronted buildings and the scattering of horses and wagons at the hitchracks their gazes swung to the marshal. The first two men quickly averted their eyes and moved away, but the third man came toward Clint, a smile on his lips.

He was an elderly man and a drummer from the look of his clothing and sample case. He set the case down and extended his hand. "Hello, marshal. My name is Herschel Strang. You look familiar; haven't I seen you somewhere?"

Clint shook the hand and tried not to show his uneasiness. "I don't believe so. My name is Clint Brazos."

"Brazos. . ." Strang's brow furrowed and he seemed lost in concentration. Finally he shook his head and smiled. "I guess not. The name is familiar, but it's not the one I had in mind. Funny, I could have sworn I'd seen you before."

The drummer moved away and Clint started along the sidewalk in the opposite direction. Though the salesman had seemed satisfied, Clint knew that memory is a thing that keeps prodding a man. The chances were that before long the drummer would remember whom Clint reminded him of, and then he'd tell it around town. The young marshal felt helpless.

Despite everything he'd done they still recognized him. He'd moved far enough away; he'd tried to change his appearance and characteristics; he'd even changed his name from Steve Barstow. But he couldn't change his resemblance to his father, and that was how they identified him.

The bitter lines around his mouth deepened as frustration darkened his mood. He was Hank Barstow's son and they weren't going to let him forget it. He would carry the stigma to the grave.

He went in to check the *Pleasure-Time Saloon,* and as he stopped by the end of the long bar he saw that the first two newcomers were here. They were standing halfway down the bar and as Clint exchanged pleasantries with a barkeep he studied them from the corners of his eyes.

THE BIGGER of the pair was a gunslinger. That much was obvious from his tied-down gun and the notches carved on its handle. The other, a youth, apparently had taken his companion for an idol; he had copied his clothing, aped his mannerisms, and wore a sixgun tied in the same position. A full shot glass was on the counter before each of them; and they stood looking unseeingly into the backbar mirror, in the manner of men whose thoughts are far away.

Clint moved along the counter and came to a stop beside them. "Afternoon," he said.

They studied him in the mirror without turning their heads. "Hello, marshal," the bigger man acknowledged the greeting.

"Plan to be in town long?" Clint did not believe in wasting time.

"Depends," the older man said.

Clint took a moment to digest the information. "You gents have a job in mind, or you just visiting?"

"Getting almighty curious ain't he, Jake?" the youth suddenly said, in the loud voice foolish young men use to draw attention to themselves.

Jake smiled and Clint recognized him from different things he had heard about him. Jake Kalender was a gunman very anxious to build up his repu-

tation. The word was that he went out of his way to do it.

"No," Jake said. "We plan to look around; if we like what we see we may stay a while."

"Take my advice," Clint said. "We don't like strangers, particularly unemployed strangers, hanging around. The next stage leaves in about an hour. It might be a good idea to be on it."

The youth snickered contemptuously. "I guess he don't know who he's talking to, Jake," he said, in the loud voice.

Again Jake smiled his appreciation of the youth's partisanship. "And if we're not, marshal?"

For the first time Clint began to suspect the reason for Jake Kalender's visit. He looked into the mirror and met the man's eyes. "I said be on it!" he repeated.

They studied each other for several long moments, then Kalender's lips curled into a mocking smile. Clint turned and made his way to the batwings, conscious that the eyes of the two men followed him until he pushed through the doors.

As he continued on his way, he was certain that Kalender and his sidekick wouldn't accept his ultimatum. He had acquired a reputation in the time that he had been marshal here, and he saw that if Kalender could add the name Clint Brazos to the list of victims he now boasted his stature would be considerably enhanced. It was possible that Kalender had deliberately come here for the purpose of drawing on him.

If Kalender had come for that reason he would get his wish. A peculiar eagerness gripped the marshal. No one would ever accuse Clint Brazos of being yellow.

He went into the building that served as combination office and jail and took his seat behind the desk. He started to leaf through the mail when the door opened to admit the drummer. There was a triumphant smile on the salesman's face.

"I know who you remind me of!" he said. "Did you ever happen to meet Hank Barstow?"

Despair seized Clint and he averted his face. It was no use! They'd locate him in hell itself. When he looked back his face was expressionless. "I've never seen the man," he lied. "I've heard of him."

"I imagine everybody's heard of Hank Barstow," the drummer said warmly. "There was a great lawman. You know, I saw him face a lynch mob single-handed once. They were drunk and mean but Hank faced them down and turned them away. It took nerve and guts, but Hank had plenty of both."

Clint listened, keeping his face emotionless, but inside the pain occasioned by the words was almost too much to bear.

"Well, I don't want to bother you," the drummer said. "But you're the spitting image of Hank, and I thought you might be some relation."

THE SALESMAN left, and Clint looked back at the mail. But he couldn't keep his mind on it. After several moments he threw it down and walked to the window, staring unseeingly into the street.

Sure, he remembered all the stories about his father. Hank was supposed to have been one of the greatest lawmen in the history of the West. Maybe he had been; maybe he'd done all the things he was supposed to have done. But Clint doubted it, for he knew how stories grew from little incidents.

He remembered as a kid how he'd idolized his father. He remembered how he'd been a celebrity among his companions and even with the older folk because he was Hank Barstow's son. And he remembered how he determined to follow in his father's footsteps...

He was in early adolescence when he'd sneaked into town that day. The Barstows lived on a small ranch near the town and Hank had insisted that his son be kept away from the streets where he did his work. He'd come up on a crowd that was watching a drama being enacted on the street. He'd pushed through the people and watched, spellbound.

His father stood in the center of the street, his legs spread slightly apart, hands well away from the holstered guns at his hips. A short distance in front of him a man lay dead, the gun still smoking in his hand. And advancing toward his father was another man. This man was taking slow, careful steps and his hands hung over his holstered sixguns. He halted by the dead man, crouched a little, and when he spoke his voice was high and full of emotion.

"Draw, you murdering skunk!" he said.

He had waited, expecting to see his father outdraw the man and kill him. But Hank had done a peculiar thing; he'd studied his opponent a long time, then turned his back on him and walked away!

The crowd had stared in wonder and he had sneaked away. There was only one conclusion he could draw; and that was that his father had been afraid to draw! With that realization his whole world had collapsed.

After that his relationship with his father had changed. Clint was ashamed of him and Hank had seemed to sense the fact and possibly to guess the reason why. Yet he'd never made an attempt to explain to his son, and Clint wouldn't have listened had Hank tried to do so. Shortly afterward, a bushwhack bullet had killed Hank and later he'd ridden away.

THE SOUND of the stage leaving town brought him back to the present. He checked the gun at his side and stepped into the street. He moved along the sidewalk and, as he had expected, Jake Kalender and his protege hadn't obeyed his order. The two men were lounging on the sun porch of the Pleasure-Time and as he came along the sidewalk Kalender stepped into the street.

Clint angled into the street without changing his stride. If this was what Kalender wanted it was all right with him. He would accept any man's challenge; and it was another opportunity to prove to himself that his father's cowardice was not inheritable. He felt an eagerness to do so, to rest the torment which was continually in his mind.

The distance between the two men shortened and Kalender came to a stop, his feet apart, his body leaning a little forward, his hand hanging claw-like over his gun. Clint stopped and he felt the confidence of his skill.

"I told you to be on that stage, Kalender," he said.

"Go to hell, marshal!" Kalender's hand darted for his gun, and with his first movement Clint started his own draw. His gun cleared leather a fraction of a second before Kalender's and he took time to aim before he squeezed the trigger. The gun roared and bucked, and Kalender was slammed backward, his revolver exploding harmlessly into the ground. He struck the ground with his shoulders and lay still.

Clint holstered his gun, conscious of the citizens gathering on the sidewalks. But suddenly the kid, Kalender's companion, was kneeling beside the body. "Jake!" he said, and his voice expressed all the heartbreak a boy feels when he realizes that his idol is nothing but clay. When he understood that Kalender was dead, he climbed slowly to his feet and suddenly turned grief-stricken eyes on Clint.

"You murderer!" he screamed. "Draw!"

He tensed his body in an amateurish

imitation of Jake's stance, feet slightly apart, body forward, hand over his gun.

A little startled, Clint Brazos stared at him. If he drew on the boy it would be nothing but *murder!* Kalender had been a gunman and he'd stood a chance of besting Clint. But this boy...

Clint studied him several moments, then turned his back on him and walked away. Behind him, he heard the boy calling him every name to which he could lay tongue.

Back in his office he sank into the chair. When the kid got over his crazy grief, he'd understand that Clint could easily have killed him. And if he had the stuff it might be the lesson he needed...

The whole episode reminded him of that other years ago; and of how his father must have wanted to explain to him and yet realized that his son wouldn't have believed him. It was something you couldn't explain. If he could only tell his father now that he understood!

He thought of how difficult it must have been for Hank during those last years and a swelling came to his throat and tears to his eyes. Life was funny. He slammed his fist into the desk with a force that hurt and kept slamming. And when he stood up Clint Brazos was dead forever and Steve Barstow had taken his place.

★

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*Lee Winters' Story*

by Lon Williams

# THE BEE'S NEST

**Dardeen Blackwood had loved bees, always had them around her — but Dardeen Blackwood was dead, murdered years ago. But now Lee Winters and Doc Bogannon both heard the sound of bees, and Winters had seen a woman who looked like Dardeen Blackwood get off the incoming stage...**

DEPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters stopped his horse on Forlorn Gap's northeastern edge and held himself in an attitude of listening. Somwhere in his experience he'd become acquainted with bees, learned to distinguish their easy, gently-musical working flight from that sharply humming noise they made when angry. Though, judged by positions of stars above mountain peaks, it was near midnight, he heard what seemed to him a vast swarm of restless, angry bees. He'd always understood that bees didn't fly after dark; hence, what he heard filled him with uneasiness and foreboding.

He allowed Cannon Ball to drift on past deserted houses, through ghostly, noiseless streets to where a few lights were still burning. At Goodlett Hotel a man stepped from Brazerville-Elkhorn stagecoach. He carried a suitcase and went into Goodlett, ostensibly in search of lodging.

Then, to Lee's dismay, a most attractive young woman also alighted. Something about her appearance caused him to tighten Cannon Ball's reins again. She had no luggage. She did not go into Goodlett Hotel, but walked away alone, wraithlike and noiseless, to be received and hidden by shadows.

Winters sleeved his face. He thought over his past few hours. Nothing had occurred to unnerve him, except possibly his arrest of a wanted monkey named Hemp Dosser, whom he had turned over to Deputy Marshal

Blackwood was a notorious killer...

Jess Fingerwell of Pangborn Gulch. He'd had no encounters with spooks, had drunk from no bewitched streams. Yet, if he had not just now seen a ghost his imagination from cause unknown had gone wild. His mind told him a woman who moved without sound, and unseen by anyone except himself, had alighted from Brazerville stage.

Not far from Goodlett Hotel other lights shone.

Doc Bogannon, owner and operator of Forlorn Gap's only remaining saloon, was tidying up for his customary midnight closing when his batwings swung in and a slim, weatherbeaten, familiar figure strode in.

"Winters!" Bogie exclaimed hospitably. "Winters, I'm glad to see you."

"Wine and two glasses," responded Winters. He glanced about to find that Bogannon was alone, then dropped into a chair by a table and waited.

Bogannon was large, straight, dark-haired, with broad shoulders and magnificent head and face, one of earth's noblemen who, for reasons of his own lived with a half-breed Shoshone wife and operated a saloon as his only visible means of livelihood. Usually he moved fast when serving his friend Winters, but his customary alacrity was now missing.

He brought wine, poured for Win-

ters, then for himself, and sat down. "I trust you've had a good day, Winters?"

Winters sipped his wine. "Right common day," he replied. "But if you'll pardon my saying so, you look uncommon downhearted yourself."

Bogie's heavy eyebrows lifted. "So you noticed? I didn't realize I was being so obvious. Yes, Winters, I do have a most depressed feeling—aggravated by my inability to account for it in any rational realistic terms."

"Yeah?" said Winters. His tone suggested further comment.

"It's true, Winters," Bogie continued gloomily. "Ordinarily I'm a cheerful individual, one who delights in observation of his fellow-man and has few worries about what has gone before, what is now, or what tomorrow may bring. But this evening I'm disturbed by an unreasoning, unreasonable and totally unsupported feeling that I'm through—that for me absolutely nothing is left."

LEE DOWNED his wine and backhanded his mustache. "Doc, for your good right now, you should've met my pa's Aunt Millie Orphington. She was a kind-hearted, patience-lovin' Ozark Mountain woman."

Bogie eyed him dully. "Really?"

"Yeah, Doc," declared Winters with a nod of emphasis. "She had what you'd call a philosophy. Aunt Millie always said, *'If you ever come to a time when you think you ain't got nothing at all to look forward to, just remember this: You can always set a mouse trap'.*"

Bogie stared dazedly, then slowly shook his head. "At any other time, Winters, I'd appreciate that. Indeed, I'm confident it's a profound and meaningful philosophy. But right now, I couldn't look forward even to catching a mouse."

"Feel sick?"

"No."

"Nothing hurts?"

"Nothing."

"Bad news?"

"Now, that's close," said Bogie. "It's not something I've heard either about myself or about other people. It's simply something I've heard." He stared at Winters as if debating whether he should speak frankly. "I hate to mention it, Winters. You see, I've scoffed a great deal about spooks; it's not pleasant for one to admit his error."

"Never mind me, Doc. As for ghosts, I can take 'em or leave 'em."

Bogie hardened his nerve. "All right, Winters, I've been hearing bees."

Lee felt himself start. So he hadn't just imagined things himself. After a moment, he pushed his glass across. "Fill it." When it was full, he drew it back and drank generously. Then, to hide his own inner stirrings, he said facetiously, "At first you had me worried, Doc, but I get it now. You've got ringing in your ears; we all have that experience sooner or later."

Bogie shook his head. "I thought as much, Winters. But that doesn't explain it. What I heard was varied, as if an interminable swarm was passing, some of its members winging along at ease, some disturbed, others fiercely singing in anger. No, Winters, it's not something in my ears. A remarkable phenomenon has been, and is, going on. Sound. Incessant sound. Yet I haven't seen a bee. Winters, I'm worried."

Further comment was interrupted. Bogie's batwings swung inward and a stranger came in—that same stranger Winters had seen alight from Brazerville stage and go into Goodlett Hotel.

"Evening, gentlemen," their visitor said with an unconvincing effort at politeness. "May I join you?"

Bogie got up and nodded questioningly. "Mind, Winters?"

Winters twisted round in his chair. Something about this stranger immediately hit a string in his memory. Here was a handsome cross between dude and devil, a man with fine fea-

tures, clean-shaved, tall, his checkered brown suit filled with bone and muscle, gray-green eyes cold, unsmiling, under his left arm a slight bulge which suggested a hideout gun.

"Set down," said Winters.

"Pleased to have you join us," said Bogie. "I'm Doc Bogannon. My friend is Deputy Marshal Lee Winters."

"I'm Sandford Menefee," announced their visitor. Warily he eased into a chair.

Bogie went for another glass, returned, filled it. "Winters and I were having our customary nightcap. Midnight is my invariable closing time."

MENEFEE drew a gold watch from his pocket. "Fortunately, several minutes are left." With his left hand he lifted his glass, eyed Winters fixedly over its top, kept his body at a left-hand angle for a swift draw, quickly downed his drink.

Winters glanced at Bogannon and caught his breath. Bogie had paled since Menefee's arrival: speech had ceased. In that silence, Winters heard a humming sound, as if bees were all around them. Bogie's pallor suggested that he, too, had heard and was scared.

With a start, Bogie looked at his own watch. "Midnight!" he exclaimed. He got up gathered his bottle and glasses and retreated. "Sorry, gentlemen."

Menefee sprang up arrogantly. "Hold it, sir; it lacks ten minutes of midnight."

Winters rose, shoved himself clear of table and chair. Both instinct and experience warned him that a ruthless killer stood before him, a homicidal maniac, indeed, who trembled from his repressed urge to draw and commit instant murder.

"Doc sets his own timepiece, Menefee," Winters told him coldly.

Menefee fixed his murderous scrutiny upon Winters. "Consult your own watch. You know Bogannon is lying."

"My watch is not one to settle arguments by," Winters responded calmly.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning what I said."

"For a moment I thought you might be referring to your forty-five."

"My gun," Winters retorted, "is something I never mention; it speaks for itself."

Menefee hesitated. His coat hung open. Undoubtedly he had contemplated murder of Doc Bogannon, his motive being elimination of something which had opposed his will. Faced with cold opposition from Winters, he changed his mind. Craftiness called for patience. He said with a sneer. "This town is mighty small to be having a deputy marshal."

Bogie had put away bottle and glasses. He stood behind his bar at a point where he kept a gun of his own. "Forlorn Gap is a dangerous place, Menefee. Its people never ask for trouble, yet more badmen have died here than have left on their own feet."

Menefee backed slowly away, a snarl on his lips. "I'm here on business, not for trouble," he said. "Good-night, gentlemen." He turned, glanced once over his shoulder and strode out.

Winters, alert against treachery, slammed out behind him. But Menefee hurried off toward Goodlett's without further threat.

From nearby, another man moved off into shadow. This one was either on Menefee's trail, or he was a confederate. Winters felt certain this stranger had not been waiting outside by mere chance.

Bogannon came out, locked his saloon and joined Winters. Lee glanced with satisfaction at a gun which Bogie had shoved under his belt.

"Scared, Doc?" he asked, his mockery designed to conceal his own fear.

Bogie shivered. "Winters, I was never so scared in my life. That Menefee— I don't know whether he was man or ghost."

"He was no ghost," said Lee. "You

saw him drink wine. In walking, he made as much noise as anybody."

"But those bees!" Bogie gasped.

"Bees?"

"Winters, don't tell me you didn't hear bees. While Menefee was present, that saloon was full of them."

Winters swallowed dryly. He was glad it was night, so Bogie couldn't see how scared he was. "Let's go home, Doc. You need a good night's rest. Maybe you've been working too hard."

WINTERS led his horse and walked home with Bogannon.

When he had there mounted, Bogie looked up gratefully. "Winters, I do appreciate this. As certainly as I'm standing here, you saved my life back there in my saloon. I'd never thought of myself as a coward, but tonight I've been completely terrorized."

"Still hear bees?" asked Winters. As for himself, what faint humming he continued to hear was readily attributable to imagination.

Bogie listened. "Yes, Winters, I do hear them. But, I'm glad to say that humming is no longer so pronounced. There's a danger zone somewhere, and we're still close to it, though not now so close to its center."

A suspicion had grown steadily in Lee's mind, with it a chilly dread. "Doc, have you ever seen Menefee before tonight?"

Bogie replied promptly, "I'm afraid I have, Winters."

"Who is he?"

"I couldn't say of a certainty but if he's not Dirk Blackwood he's a mighty close likeness."

"Blackwood," mused Winters. "That rings a bell."

"You've probably seen him. He lived for a short time in one of those now-deserted houses on that side of Elkhorn Road toward Alkali Flat. It's still called Blackwood House; people whom I know are afraid to go near it."

"Why's that?"

Bogie turned his face away, embarrassed. "Winters, this time yesterday I would have answered your question with a smile; now, however, I'm not smiling. Blackwood House is believed to be haunted."

Lee glanced toward one of Bogie's windows. A light glowed inside. Bogie's charming young Shoshone was there. A midnight meal had been set. "Your wife's waiting, Doc. Goodnight."

He kneed Cannon Ball and was gone.

Instead of going directly home, he headed south toward Alkali Flat. Early in Forlorn Gap's brief history he had ridden occasionally through Kalany Street past Blackwood House. It was not, as its name hinted, a pretentious place but only a small cottage, noted mainly for its heavy, ornate window shutters and its strong, iron-laced doors.

He had forgotten its exact location, hence came upon it suddenly and without forewarning of what he might see. So abrupt and fierce was his reaction that Cannon Ball was almost on his haunches when he stopped.

Blackwood House was aglow with lamplight, brilliant beyond ordinary illumination. Indeed, Blackwood House seemed to be enveloped within a great dome of light. What surprised him most, though a turn half-expected, was that a slender, enchanting young woman stood framed inside one of its front windows.

She glanced up sweetly and smiled. "Howdy Lee."

Winters' tongue was almost too dry for speech. "Huh?" he croaked. "I mean, howdy."

"You behave most strangely. Are you scared?"

He gulped. "Yeah, I reckon I am." Then he remembered something. "You got off of Brazerville stage, didn't you?"

She had placed a window-sill dish before her. "Why yes, I did," she re-

plied. "I saw you gawking at me and wondered if you'd lost your manners, as you didn't offer to speak. You should've remembered me. Often I used to see you riding your handsome horse down Forlorn Gap's main street. Why, sometimes you even rode by here. I'm Dardeen Blackwood."

Winters could not overcome his dry swallows. "W-what are you doing here?"

She had a jar in her hands. She began to spoon honey from it. Apparently Lee's question carried an unintended meaning to her. "Why, I'm feeding my bees. They must be very hungry, too, seeing that they've come from so far away."

He'd been hearing again that hum of invisible bees. "So that's . . ."

What he started to say remained unsaid. Cannon Ball, acting as if he'd been stung by a bee, came near to leaping from under his rider. Winters barely hung on as Cannon Ball leaped, reared, pawed air, and plunged homeward.

FOLLOWING a midnight supper, Winters contemplated his beautiful wife across their small dining table. She had been among Forlorn Gap's earliest settlers. Murder had made her a young widow. Winters, after killing her husband's murderer in defense of his own life, had made her a wife again by marrying her himself.

"Myra," he told her in heart-felt admiration, "you grow more beautiful every day. I was a lucky man when I got you."

"Lee, you flatterer!" she chided with delight.

"Besides beauty, you've got sense. And you read books."

She studied him sincerely. "Best of all, Lee, I've got you for my husband. Without you to be with me in this far-away place, I'd die of loneliness. With you to protect, support and compliment me, I'm completely happy and unafraid of anything."

Something was on his mind to ask this lovely creature who read, dreamed, and listened to all manner of gossip. He considered how to begin. "Myra, you don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

"Are you about to call me a ghost?"

"There are times when I wonder if you ain't just something pretty I've dreamed up, but as you probably guessed my curiosity has been aroused. Tonight Doc Bogannon mentioned Blackwood House."

Myra's eyes rounded. "Really?"

"Yeah. Doc says it's haunted."

"Well, of course, Lee."

"Then you do believe in ghosts. And you mean it sure enough is?"

"I thought everybody knew that Blackwood House is haunted."

"Humph! I reckon I've missed out on something. Tell me about it."

"A woman was murdered there."

"Maybe you'd better go farther back to begin."

"Oh, you want a complete history?"

"I reckon I do. It's embarrassing for a man to live in a town and be so downright ignorant about it."

Myra regarded her hands absently. "Let's see now. First, her name was Dardeen—Dardeen Blackwood. Her husband was Dirk Blackwood. They came from St. Louis, though Dardeen herself was a country girl. A peculiar sort of girl she was, too, with a small white neck that contrasted so strikingly against her raven-black hair. But strangest of all, she loved bees."

"Bees?" Winters had started as if snatched from sleep. "What do you mean, bees?"

"It *is* hard to believe, truly," said Myra with a distant look. "Dardeen nevertheless had brought a colony of bees clear from Missouri. On warm days she would sit outdoors and watch them come and go, excited by their wonder and mystery. Then one day her beastly husband came home drunk, found her watching her lovely bees. In anger and spite, he built a bonfire and burned them. After that, Dardeen was

sad, broody, disconsolate. For days she put out honey for those few bees, away when their hive was burned, that came back and wandered aimlessly. Dardeen talked to them, wept with them, it's said. Without a queen bee to keep them together, they dwindled until at last there was none."

"Then what?" Lee prompted.

"Well, let's see. It's been some time, you know."

"I do know."

"Dirk Blackwood had a good claim staked out, but he wouldn't work it. He made money, though. How, people could only guess. Finally he sold his claim and disappeared for weeks, leaving poor Dardeen with barely enough to keep off starvation. Then a stagecoach was robbed; its driver and gunguard were killed; its box of gold bars was taken. Searchers must've suspected Dirk Blackwood. A trail led them to Forlorn Gap and to Blackwood House. But what they found was Dardeen. She was dead; some one had strangled her."

RECOLLECTION began to return to Winters. Those events had occurred while he was dividing his time between Forlorn Gap and Brazerville. Dirk Blackwood, though darkly suspected of robbery, had never been on Winters' list of wanted monkeys. Even so, his cold, maniacally cruel face, once seen, had remained unforgettable.

"Any notion of who murdered Dardeen?" Lee asked.

Myra's answer was immediate and certain. "Of course; naturally it was Dirk."

"Naturally," Lee agreed. "But what makes you think so?"

"Well, it's a haunted house, isn't it?"

Winters gave that some thought. It was provoking, amusing, yet instinctively wise for her to come up with an answer like that. It was like saying *because;* in other words, *you figure it.*

Through most of what was left of that night, he puzzled over her answer. Blackwood House certainly was haunted; that he'd just seen for himself. It was haunted by Dardeen Blackwood's ghost. It was also haunted by bees. But how did those facts prove that Dirk Blackwood had murdered his wife in Blackwood House? Well, *because!*

Suddenly, at dawn, he sat erect in their bed. Myra, alarmed, sat up beside him. "Lee, what happened?"

"Nothing," he answered nervously. "Didn't you ever set up in bed without exactly knowing why?"

"I guess I have, really."

"Listen! Do you hear anything?"

Myra stilled. Then she laughed softly. "I guess our imaginations are playing tricks on us."

"Why?"

"Well, don't you hear them?"

"Hear what?"

"Why, bees, of course."

"Yeah, sure. I merely wanted to make sure I wasn't just going cuckoo."

"You really do hear them?"

"Never heard anything plainer in my life."

He got up and dressed. Myra followed, and they soon had breakfast.

He rode to his office afterwards, ran through pictures of wanted monkeys, then dropped in at Bogannon's saloon to inquire for mail.

That worried look which had been on Bogie's face was still there. He was alone, yet he had not seen Winters until he was spoken to.

"Any mail, Doc?"

BOGIE SWUNG round, startled. "Ah, it's you, Winters. Why, yes, there is mail. It should've been brought over last midnight, but you will recall that I fudged on our guest by closing ten minutes early. Here." He handed Lee a letter addressed in Marshal Hugo Landers' barely legible handwriting.

Winters tore into it and read. *Dear Winters. Dirk Blackwood is out. That*

*gold he's supposed to took from Elkhorn Stage three years ago was never found. Dirk will likely show up soon to get it. He had a crony that will probably be looking for Dirk, sort of to get even for a double-cross. Watch for both of them. This crony's name is Seth Olney. If you find that gold yourself, there's a thousand-dollar reward for you. Yours truly, Hugo Landers, Marshal.*

He handed it to Bogie. "Right interesting, Doc."

Bogie read it and handed it back. "As a coincidence, Winters, I saw your man Blackwood, alias Menefee, riding out as I came in. He was headed northeast."

"But he came in by stage."

"A horse can still be rented from Dezley's livery."

Five minutes later Winters was at Dezley's. Hiram Dezley was seated out front, whittling. He had a sunken place where an eye had been.

"Want to sell that horse, Winters?"

"Dezley," Winters replied, "all I want is to know where Dirk Blackwood said he was going when you rented him a horse."

Dezley spat and resumed his whittling. "Winters, what I'm told I treat as confidential."

"When it's asked of you," Winters reminded him coolly.

Dezley squinted upward. "How'd you know I wasn't asked this time?"

"Speak up, Dezley. Where was Blackwood going?"

"He said his name was Sand Menefee."

"You know as well as I do, he's Dirk Blackwood."

Dezley whittled slowly. "You guessed right, Winters. What's more, Blackwood didn't ask me to keep it confidential. I reckon maybe he sort of meant I shouldn't."

"All right?"

Dezley cast his thumb toward a towering region of rocks and cliffs. "Blackwood said he had a trip into Mongo Mountain; hinted he had some gold buried up there." He eyed Winters uncivilly. "There was another nosey feller here, askin' same as you where Blackwood went."

Winters' eyebrows lifted. "That so?"

"Nothing was ever more so. This feller said he was an old friend of Blackwood's. Sort of wanted to see him. Blackwood had took off up that westside trail by Buzzard Rock. It was that way this other feller went."

"Know this other fellow's name?"

"Yessir, matter of fact, I do, though he never mentioned it. Nor did he ask me to keep anything confidental. He was a shady character named Olney, and I'll bet my best saddle he was riding a stole horse." He spat again. "Sure you don't want to sell that big horse, Winters?"

Winters kneed Cannon Ball into a quarter-turn. "Dezley, you're a right obligin' citizen." He held back a moment. "Just happened to think of something else, Dezley. You ain't seen any bees buzzin' around, I reckon?"

Dezley's mouth dropped open. His one eye grew wide. "Now, why did you ask me that, Winters?"

"Curiosity."

"Well, Winters, I ain't seen no bees, but I've sure heard 'em buzzin'. Do you reckon this town's gittin' ha'nted?"

Winters put his horse in motion, but called back, "Wouldn't be surprised, Dezley. Sure wouldn't."

AN HOUR later he heard a shot. He was then far up in Mongo, a wilderness of stone and cliff. One horse had been following another's hoofprints. After a careful advance, Winters found what he had expected to find, namely, a dead man and his nearby bewildered horse. As the deceased was not Blackwood, Winters figured he had to be Olney; but whoever he'd been, he was of little consequence now. Nevertheless, Winters roped his remains across his horse and

headed them back toward Forlorn Gap.

Lee's interest then was in Blackwood's trail, which led him down mountainsides, into gorges and canyons, past noontime, through a grinding afternoon and, at last, into night's obscurity.

When Winters was again in Bogannon's saloon for a midnight drink, he was furious and disgusted with himself. "Doc, do you know something? Well, I'll tell you. I've been a long-eared mule. Dirk Blackwood left a hot trail into Mongo Mountain so's Seth Olney could follow and get hisself murdered. When that was done, Blackwood tricked me into following him all day and into night. And why?"

Bogie eyed his wine glass and said worriedly, "I don't know, Winters, but I venture a guess it had something to do with bees."

"Yeah, bees," said Winters, his anger abating. He listened. "But I don't hear any bees. What's become of them?"

Bogie looked sweaty. "You've got me there," he said. "All day I heard them, not great swarms, as yesterday, but comparatively few, as if stragglers had become lost and were searching hither and yon, trying to catch up, trying to find some center toward which they might gravitate. I've had premonitions that they were on their way to some rendezvous, but for a purpose beyond my imagination. Then, shortly before your arrival, those humming sounds ceased; they passed as a wind passeth and is heard no more."

Bogie wiped his face with a handkerchief. Winters had never before seen him so long-faced.

"Doc, this morning I awoke with a strange feeling. Maybe you've had dreams like it, where a light shines in your face when there's no light around. Well, something like that struck me. I got it figured."

"Figured?"

"I guess it wasn't exactly my figuring. You remember when Dardeen Blackwood was found murdered in Blackwood House?"

"I remember it well."

"Dirk Blackwood done it."

"Ah! And how did you know that?"

"Well, Blackwood House is haunted, ain't it?"

"Hmmm!" Bogie mused in an effort to make some sense of that question. "I don't follow you, Winters."

"I reckon not, Doc. What's more, if I told you what I've been seeing and hearing, you'd think I'm crazy, which I sometimes think I am, myself."

"What are you getting at?"

"You said something about a rendezvous," Winters replied distantly. "I think that's it." He looked at his watch. "It's midnight, Doc."

Bogie sprang up and hastily prepared for closing. He thrust a six-gun under his belt. "I'm becoming a lost and bewildered sheep, Winters."

Outside, Winters caught his arm. "Doc, have you got nerve enough to come with me?"

Bogie stiffened with a false show of bravery. "I never lacked courage, sir. Where to?"

"To Blackwood House."

"Well, now..."

"To Blackwood House, Doc."

Bogie hesitated, then yielded reluctantly. "All right, Winters, to Blackwood House."

WITH CANNON BALL in tow, they walked hurriedly to Kalany Street and had come within a short distance of their destination, when Bogie grasped Lee's arm.

"Listen, Winters! Do you hear them?"

Winters tried to swallow, but couldn't. Yes, he'd heard them. Bees! They hummed as if millions of them were passing overhead, their tone rising on a musical pitch, higher and higher, as if they were going at a swiftly accelerated speed, at last so tremendously fast that sound of movement

became pitched too high for human ears to register. So many there seemed to be that even by starlight they should have been visible as a moving cloud, yet nothing was seen.

How long that humming continued Winters could only guess, but it must have been many seconds. Their departure left an eerie silence. Hours before, they had gathered, perhaps in response to some mysterious summons. Now they were gone, as Bogie might have said, *as a wind that passeth and is heard no more.*

His face wet with sweat, Winters moved ahead. "Come, Doc; if I have it figured right, you're going to see something you won't ever forget."

Bogie came alongside in exhibition of exaggerated courage. "Winters, strange things have happened in this town and its environs. Until now I've been unwilling to admit it, but I can't deny it any longer. Those bees! They were here on some fateful mission. A power beyond our knowledge, one toward which we grope desperately but cannot quite touch, called them here for a purpose. But what?"

"You'll find out soon," said Winters. Suddenly he flung out an arm to stop their progress. "Hold, Doc. There's Blackwood House."

"A light's in it."

Winters dropped his horse's reins. He advanced in a breathless trance, Bogie doggedly at his side. That light which Bogie had seen filtered through window shutters, which had been closed. Blackwood House gave forth light, but no sound. Its front door was closed, but it opened and sagged back on squeaking hinges when Winters had touched its latch and shoved against it.

THEY STOOD inside and gazed in awe at what they beheld. On a shelf a lamp burned brightly. A man's hat lay upturned in a corner. Fragments of a man's shirt were scattered indiscriminately. One shred even hung upon a high, rusty nail. Fragments of trousers were likewise scattered. Several floor boards had been lifted out of place. From underneath, earth had been cast up by a shovel, revealing a gold-shipment chest, still closed.

In a distorted, agonized posture upon planks that showed signs of terrific struggle, lay Dirk Blackwood's naked body.

"As I figured it," said Winters.

"What killed him, Winters?" asked Bogie, his voice little more than a strained whisper.

Winters stepped cautiously round Blackwood's corpse. With lamp in hand, he dropped to his knees for a close look. His voice was dry, raspy. "As I figured it, Doc. He's been stung to death by bees. In fighting them, he tore his clothes to rags."

Bogie got down and stared. "Incredible!" he gasped. "But it's there to be seen. Each tiny pink spot you see on his skin is really a puncture, as an insect sting. They are so close together, so many, as to be absolutely countless."

Winters put pieces of thought together, rejected every inner suggestion that he was merely dreaming. "She was here last night, Doc."

"She?"

"Dardeen Blackwood."

"But she's been dead at least three years—more than three."

"She was here, Doc. Last night after I left you at your house, I rode past here. Dardeen was at a window, putting honey in a dish. I talked with her; she said she was feeding her bees. Doc, she and her bees came back. They had what you call a rendezvous."

Bogie's voice had sunk to a dry whisper. "It's incredible!"

"But there's one thing I can't figure," said Winters.

"As if you could figure anything about what's happened here!" scoffed Doc.

Winters went on undaunted. "From what I've seen of bees, when one stings you, it loses its stinger—leaves

it in its victim. Here there are no lost stingers."

"No?" said Bogie. "Look in Blackwood's forehead."

Winters looked. There, centering his forehead, was a ragged mass of pinhead size from which a tiny dark-colored lancet extended downward into dead flesh.

"And there!" exclaimed Bogie, pointing again.

On a floor board a few inches from Blackwood's remains, a honey bee crawled laboriously, its entrails dragging where its stinger had been torn out of its body.

Winters stared at it for many seconds. It had, indeed, come to a strange get-together; it had come to kill, and it was going to die with its victim.

Bogie likewise stared, then, as if it meant some sort of triumph for him, he exclaimed, "Ha! But what about all these other stings? No stingers were left in them, eh? What about it, Winters?"

Winters stared at him, worried about Bogie's sanity, as well as his own. "Yeah," he said, "what about it?" He got up and replaced his lamp on its shelf. "That, Doc," he added, "is one for you to figure."


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MINIATURE MURDER ..... *Clare Hamilton*
Time is vital to a killer — and a clock would add the finishing touches to this homicide...

FLOOGIE WON FLATFOOTED ..... *Bradley Burr*
And a gal who drew wolf-whistles had a real four-footed wolf to protect her. But not her brother...

*Plus Outstanding Articles and Features*

SURPRISE WITNESS ..... *Lonnie E. Legge*
ACCORDING TO THE BOOKS (Reviews) ..... *Curtis W. Casewit*
DEATH WAS A STOWAWAY ..... *Elton Webster*

*don't miss the big Feb. issue of this magazine, now on sale*

FAST ACTION DETECTIVE AND MYSTERY STORIES

# LONG-LOST TREASURE

by H. C. Early

A WAGON train of gold and silver! A fortune in American, Mexican, and Austrian coins! Buried for eighty years, this great treasure, according to legend, lies waiting at Castle Gap, close to old Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos River—waiting for someone to find it.

This lost hoard of money is all that remains of the great wealth once owned by the Emperor Maxmilian, puppet ruler of Mexico in the 1869's. For when in 1867, the forces had routed the French troops, Maxmilian had what was left of his money loaded into a group of wagons and ordered it taken across Mexico into Texas, through San Antonio to Galveston, where it was to be sent on to Austria.

Maxmilian planned to follow soon after and return to his Austrian home. But, an innocent victim of international scheming by Napoleon III, he was captured and executed.

Unaware of their master's fate, the fifteen members of the wagon train began their long journey. The group was made up of Mexicans and Austrians, including a beautiful young girl, daughter of the wagon train's leader.

The strange caravan crossed the Rio Grande at Presidio del Norte, where it was met by a band of six Missourians, veterans of the Confederate Army who had fled west to escape the carpetbag regime.

The leader of the train asked directions to San Antonio, and finally hired the men as guards. He told them that the caravan carried a valuable shipment of flour.

It must have been a very valuable shipment, the six men decided, for the drivers never left their seats, and someone slept in the wagons every night.

As the wagon train moved on, closer and closer to the Pecos River, the six rebels became more and more suspicious. Then one of them discovered the gold and silver.

Breathlessly he told his comrades what he had found. They were amazed. But they were also ambitious, and they began planning immediately to kill the occupants of the caravan and steal the gold.

Their chance came at Castle Gap, fifteen miles east of the famous Horsehead Crossing. At midnight the men on guard roused their partners, and they slipped around quietly from wag-

on to wagon, bedroll to bedroll, knifing everyone in his sleep. At last, murdered without a chance, all the travelers, including the girl, were dead.

Papers found with the gold proved it to be Maxmilian's. The bandits mapped the spot, noting a small lake and some other landmarks. Keeping out enough gold for their immediate use, they buried the rest. Then they piled the bodies into the wagons and burned them. Their grisly job done, they rode on toward old Fort Concho, intending to return later and salvage their gold. But they were never to see their treasure again.

IT WAS A long, terrible ride over the waterless desert to Fort Concho, and one of the men became very sick. He had to stay at the fort a few days to recover, but the others rode on.

Retribution was swift and merciless. Less than a day's ride past Fort Concho, a band of Comanches swept down on the five killers and massacred them. The sixth man, when he was able to ride again, set out on his partner's trail. He found their bodies, beaten and mutilated, where the Indians had left them.

A few days later he threw in with a small band of men. Only when a posse arrested them did he realize that his new friends were horse thieves, and that he, along with them, was slated for a hangman's noose.

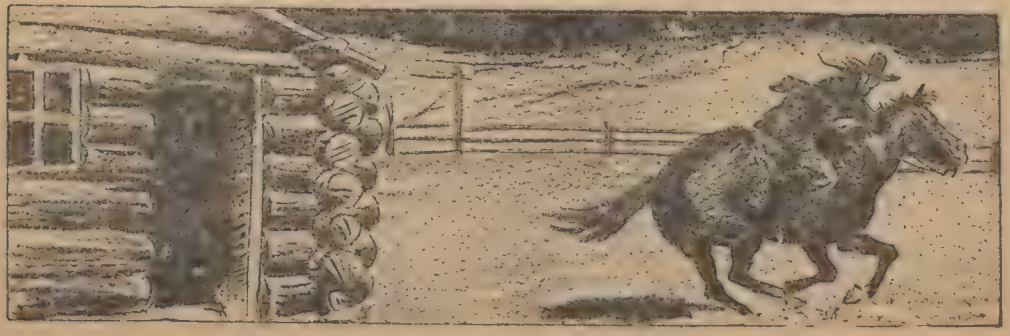
In jail he came down again with the same sickness that had stopped him at Fort Concho. His only hope for recovery was to get out of jail into fresh air and sunshine. But that was not permitted, and he sank lower and lower, until at last he called his doctor and the lawyer who had been trying vainly to get him released.

He told them his story, describing the scenery around the spot, and gave them his map. Then he died. Thus within a couple of months all six of the murderers of the helpless group from Mexico had paid for their crime.

It was a long time before the doctor and the lawyer got to Castle Gap to seek the treasure. In the time since the massacre the little lake had dried up, and the desert winds had changed most of the landmarks noted on the map. The two found only the remains of the burned wagons. They soon gave up their search.

In the years that have passed since then, hundreds of men have sought in vain for the buried fortune. The Castle Gap area today is scarred with holes dug by treasure hunters who have used everything from "witching-rods" to bulldozers.

But Castle Gap, bleak and lonely stands silent guard over the lost treasure of Maxmilian and the luckless travelers who died because of it.



# Bad Broncs From Oregon

(*continued from page 41*)

green lush grass. They also had some wonderful horses.

Thus, when Montana and Wyoming cowmen went west for Oregon cattle, they almost invariably bought Oregon horses to take back to the prairies.

Few Montana cow-outfits raised enough horses to supply their cowpunchers with *remudas* or, as a herd of saddle-horses was sometimes called, a *cavvy*. Later on, when the cow-business got more firmly established, some outfits raised only horses—breaking them out roughly and selling them to the cowmen. But for about a decade following the Civil War, Oregon supplied most of the saddle-broncs for Montana and Wyoming cowmen.

Out on open range, horses seem to multiply rapidly, and with warmer climate in Oregon, there was less winter-kill. Oregon horses were good horses. Some had a dash of hot-blood; all were chunky, solid-type horses. They had heavy hind quarters, which made them good for cutting horses, and they had tough legs and lots of wind, many being born and raised in the hill country of eastern Oregon. Most had been halter-broken —taught to lead—and some had been ridden a few times. But most of them were green; and on the long trail back across the Rockies, they were worked to get this greenness out of them.

They were various colors—roans, duns, blacks, grays, sorrels and a few pintos, but cowmen seemed to shy clear of pintos—for a pinto seldom makes a good range-horse, possibly because he is so cross bred. Indians seemed to like pintos, maybe because of their gaudiness and show; but the cowpuncher prefered a straight color horse, with maybe white stockings and a blazed head, which is about as far as natural ornaments went on one of their horses.

The Oregon cattle, too, were good cattle. They were not bony and tall like the Texas longhorns. They came from good breeding-stock, for the settlers had come from what is now the midwest, and they had taken along only their best cows and bulls. These cattle had multipled quickly on the high Oregon grass. They made much better stock to put out on range than did the longhorn. For one thing, although Oregon winters were mild compared with the deadly cold winter of Montana and Wyoming, they still knew what cold weather and snow were—therefore they made better "rustlers" in winter-time than did the longhorn, who had been raised in a warmer climate.

SOMETIMES many cowmen bought more horses than they actually needed, for once across the Continental Divide they could be sold at a nice profit. By the time the broncs had reached the Montana rangelands, they were well-broken cowponies that could work cattle and they were good roping-horses.

Oregon had also a quantity of heavy work-horses. These the cowmen also bought and drove home with their newly-purchased herd of cows and bulls. A cow outfit needed a few teams around its headquarters and there was also another demand for work-horses —this was caused by the coming of the railroads. Railroads needed work-teams for fresno and slip work while constructing rights-of-way through the virgin land. And with the railroad was coming the farmer. And the farmers needed horses, too, The wise cowman did not fight the farmer and his barb-wire; he saw that the fight was useless and therefore he made money of the farmers by selling them good Oregon work-horses.

Thus a trailherd might be composed of cattle, saddled-horses and work-horses. The work-horses would take turns pulling the mess-wagon and the bedwagon. By the time they reached their new home, they also would be wellbroken. As for the saddle-horses, working the cattle would soon thin them down, making them tough and reliable. After a while they had to get used to the double-rigged saddle with a loose rear cinch.

Most Oregon cowpunchers—and they were good hands—used a single-rigged saddle with either a center-fire or three-quarter rigged cinch. A center-fire rig had the cinch in its middle, a three-quarter meant that the cinch was three-fourths of the way of the saddle—taking the three-quarters measurement from the back of the rig. Because Montana riders were mostly from Texas and the south, where a cowpuncher had more roping chores, they rode double-rigged saddles. With two cinches, a saddle sat snugger on a horses back, and did not want to tip up in the hind skirts, when a waddy roped a steer ahead of him.

Later on, Montana cowpokes started using single-rigged one-cinch saddles, but this was after the rangelands got cut up with barbwire, which made less roping chores. Today, throughout Montana and Wyoming, you find cowpunchers riding either single-rigged or double-rigged hulls, whichever their fancy dictates. Many an evening has spent around a bunk-house stove arguing the merits of either rig. No definite decisions have ever—or will ever—be reached. Both type has its merit. But all agreed at one time on one particular point:

Oregon horses bucked when first rode with a double-rigged saddle!

★


## A "New Look" on the Old West

The new April issue features two thrilling novelets. (1) RIPE FOR THE ROPE by E. E. Clement tells of a man, unjustly imprisoned upon the false testimony of a supposed friend and partner, who found that the only way he could remain free after his escape was to rod the very law who sought him. (2) SAVIOURS FROM SANPETE by Roe Richmond is a story of the days when wagon-trains of emigrants crossed the continent under the constant threat of attack by Indians and white renegades. But this particular wagon-train could not, like most, expect any help from honest men; these were the hated Mormons. In the fact department, we have an account of the old days by Pete Carter; LOOKING INTO THE PAST relates a sequence of experiences Pete and a friend underwent in the days of his youth when they were "drifting cowpokes".

This issue is now on sale at all stands; don't miss it!

*You'll find these, and other outstanding features and stories, in the April* 1958

# FAMOUS WESTERN

*THE BEST IN FACT AND FICTION*

# Revenge At Fang's Gulch

by Edward Garner

Now Gila Walker, Skunk Whetstine,
and
One vulpine Fox McUgh,
Were three as rare old cutthroats as
Wild Fang's Gulch ever knew.
To many they had handed out
The cup of bitter rue!

The populace of Fang's Gulch lived
Their days in constant fear,
The Fox was always at some throat,
With Gila lurking near;
While Whetstine, down at Adams' bar,
Drank whiskey with a leer!

Into Fang's Gulch a stranger came,
With vengeance in his eye,
The Skunk, the Gila, and the Fox,
He swore would have to die—
He'd croon them to the Last Roundup
With a hot lead lullaby!

The three had done the stranger dirt
On a frontier far away,
And through the years, into his ears
Had dinned the word, *"Repay!"*
And so, the stranger, Black Sinn, rode
Into Fang's Gulch that day.

Sinn hitched his nag, then lit a fag,
And nonchalantly strayed
To Adams' bar, where Fox and Skunk,
And Gila sat and played
Stud poker, while cards up their sleeves
Much in their favor weighed!

The Gila looked and saw Black Sinn;
He reached, and then he cussed,
For Sinn's sure bullet met him with
A hot and lethal lust,
And dined him on the bill of fare
Of those who bite the dust!

The Skunk then paled, while the Fox
quailed;
They tried to make the door,
But it transpired that Black Sinn fired,
As he had fired before,
And in the nostrils of good men
The Skunk would smell no more!

Then Fox dashed for timber tall,
And Black Sinn followed fast,
To get him within pistol range,
So his evil would be past,
So into Hell's root cellar the
Fox could at once be cast!

The Fox was sharp and crafty still,
And so a plan was made,
He pulled his shirt tail up his back,
Like a white window shade—
Surrender's signal to Black Sinn,
Whose quick gun marked debts paid.

Black Sinn rode up with smiling face,
And said to Fox, said he,
"You're smart. Now, who'd have
thought of that?
We'll ride together, we
From now on will be partners—
We will as brothers be!"

*Today out in the West there rides,*
*With an unholy grin,*
*A solitary horseman, who*
*Did in the dread Black Sinn;*
*He's called the Fox, and he is sought*
*By men with stars of tin!*

# THE RESCUE OF SHERIFF MASTERSON

by Charles V. Grunwell

AT HIGH NOON on a summer day, the United States marshal from Dodge City, Wyatt Earp, wearing a speckled silk vest over a brown woolen shirt with a wide-brim, flat-top black hat shadowing his clean shaven face, entered the town of Albine and trotted his bay horse slowly down its cabin-lined, dust-filled street. Earp's wrinkled brow and tensed countenance indicated that he was both weary and worried.

Sudden pistol shots in a nearby street startled the marshal and made him bring his horse to a stop. Several minutes later, a man in cowboy clothes came riding into the town square, several hundred yards ahead, firing his pistol into the air.

At the tie rack, the rider sprang from his saddle, wrapped the reins around the rail and dashed into a near-by gaudily-painted saloon. In a short time, a number of heavily-armed men came running from every direction into the square and headed for the saloon.

Puzzled, Earp raised his hat and lightly scratched his head. Extending his hand, he flecked several specks of lather from his horse's mane and said, "Queer doin's, Molley. The gent must have mighty important news judgin' from the rumpus he's raising."

Without taking his eyes from the scene, Earp pulled a handkerchief from his hip pocket and began wiping the dust from his brow. Finishing the wipe, he put the handkerchief back in his pocket and said, "Reckon we'd better investigate. Might be about Mr. Masterson, but we've got to go careful. The people in this town don't like me very much."

Turning the horse around, he came to an alley which he saw passed by the rear of the saloon. After a moment's hesitation, he headed the horse down the alley.

He arrived at the rear door of the

saloon and, hearing loud voices inside, he dismounted, tied the horse to a post and quietly entered. He found himself standing on a raised platform from which he could look over the heads of the room's occupants and out through the tall glass windows into the town square beyond. Several barrels of whiskey stood on the platform; Earp quickly dropped on his knee behind them.

The long, smoke-filled room was crowded. Leaning against the bar and emphasizing his loud talk with his hands, stood the man the marshal had just seen riding into the square. Now and then the fellow would pause, pour a drink from a bottle which stood beside him, lift the glass and down the liquor.

"As I was sayin'," Earp heard him remark, "I've jest come from Dodge City, an' I'm a-tellin' you all thet thet town is not only red hot, but h'its jest a-bilin'. Yestidy, bandits rid in an' kidnapped their sheriff. His name's Willie—Willie Masterson, an' they say he's Earp's pet. Earp, as you all happens to know, is the United States marshal over there, an' he's madder'n a rattlesnake. This minnit, he an' a posse are scourin' the country lookin' for them bandits."

Pausing to take another drink, the man continued. "This Willie wuz Earp's favorite deputy an' he got him elected sheriff. The feller's young an' has a sissie first name; but he's like Earp, quick on the draw, a dead shot an' ain't afraid of nothin'. Reckon that's why Earp likes 'im."

Standing beside the man doing the talking, with one of his feet on the bar railing and holding an half empty glass in his hand, was a lean, lanky man with a star on his breast. "You say, Clem, that it happened yesterday, an' nobody knows who the bandits wuz?"

"Nope. They wuz masked. They rode into town, grabbed the feller out of a saloon, took his hoss an' made off with him. They wuz pretty slick."

THE SHERIFF casually turned his body around and faced the room, letting both elbows rest upon the edge of the bar behind him. "Wa'al, now, Clem," he drawled indifferently, "what if them bandits did snatch this so-called sheriff? What's that to us? Nothin', as far as I can see. Certainly nothin' to warrant all this fuss you've come all this distance to make. I'm jest sorry they didn't snatch Earp along with 'im. That hombre is shore pizen to me; he's too damn meddlesome. I'm a-goin' to fix his business some day."

Clem exploded. "Nothin', you say? How about the thousand dollar reward Dodge City has done offered to anyone bringin' the sheriff back alive? That's nothin', is it?"

A sudden barely-audible gasp escaped the inmates of the room. Clem grinned. "Thought that news would roust you all."

The sheriff turned his head and gazed expectantly at Clem, a sudden crafty gleam appearing in his eyes. "A thousand dollars did you say? Well, now, mister, that sorter makes it different. Got any idea what this bird looks like?"

Clem reached in his pocket and pulled out a piece of a newspaper. "Here's a description of him, but knowin' you all like I do, I doubts if any of you has the guts to take the feller away from them bandits in case you meets up with 'em. Says here thet he wore a yeller shirt, an' a big brown sombrero. He also sports a mustache."

Of a sudden was heard the sound of a galloping horse entering the square; it caused everyone in the room to turn toward the front and listen.

"Who's that, Bill?" the sheriff called to a man standing by one of the front windows. "'T'ain't Earp, is it?"

Dunno, Hank, who't is." Bill replied. "Seems to be a youngish-lookin' feller." Suddenly Bill exclaimed, "I'll

be doggoned if he don't look like thet sheriff kid Clem's jest been tellin' us about."

Riding swiftly up to the tie rack, the rider dismounted, wrapped the reins around the pole and came hurrying into the saloon. He was a well-built young man twenty some years of age; and, as Clem had said, he wore a yellow shirt and a big brown hat. He appeared to be hot and quite bedraggled, as if he had had a rough experience. Evidently he had come a long distance and in a hurry as his horse was blowing hard and was dripping sweat.

At sight of the new arrival, the worried expression on Earp's face changed to one of relief. He jerked out his gun and arose to go down into the barroom, but changed his mind. "Better wait a bit," he said to himself. "Might have a chance to kill two birds with one stone."

As the newcomer entered the saloon, the occupants became suddenly and ominously quiet. Quickly, the silence was broken by the slight swishing sound made by numerous revolvers as they were jerked from their holsters and leveled at the stranger. The movement plainly indicated that the owners instantly had decided that this was that Willie fellow, and that they had better not take any chances with the reputedly quick-shooting hombre.

To Earp, this pistol-drawing by a crowd against one man seemed cowardly. He smiled at the panicky effect Mr. Masterson's reputedly fierce reputation had produced on them.

Although surprised at this belligerent reception in what he naturally took to be a quiet, peaceful town, the young man smiled friendly and stood motionless, his hands hanging loosely by his sides. He carried no arms.

THE SHERIFF calmly drained his glass, turned and placed it upon the counter. Stepping away from the bar, he holstered his gun, put his hands on his hips and stared appraisingly at the newcomer. "From yore description, Clem, you reckon this could be him?"

Not liking the contemptuous tone of the sheriff's inquiry, the young man's attitude changed instantly. "Could be who, sheriff?" he interrupted, speaking somewhat insolently.

Annoyed at the interruption, the

[*Turn To Page* 80]

**2 Outstanding Novelets**

FAR FROM SOMEWHERE by Randall Garrett

THE TIME FOR DELUSION by Donald Franson

***A Significant Science Article***

THE LITTLEST by Isaac Asimov

***A Hilarious Short Story***

FLUOROCARBONS ARE HERE TO STAY
by Donald Westlake

*These, and many others are featured in the March issue of*

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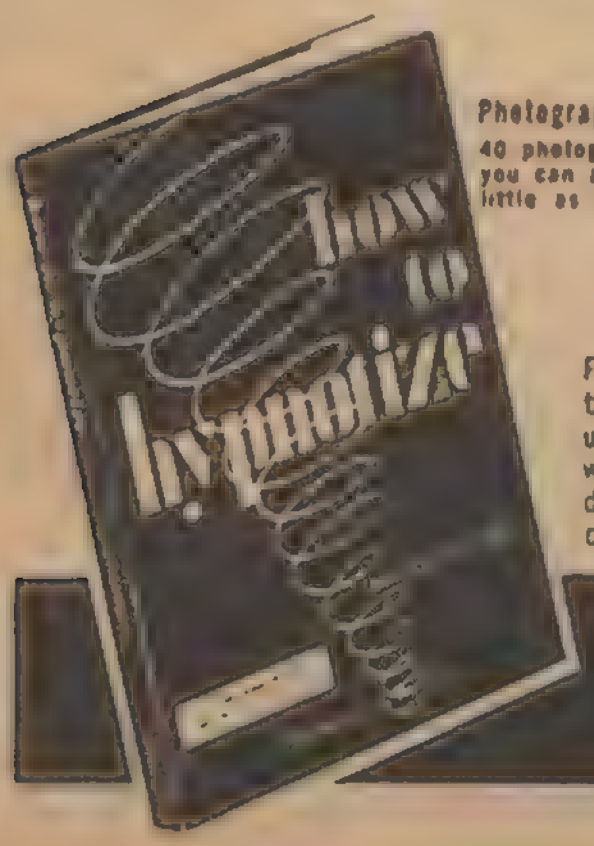


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sheriff grumbled, "I mean could you be that so-called sheriff, who, Clem here, says a gang of bandits snatched out of a saloon over in Dodge City? From the looks of you, them people must have been hard up for a sheriff."

It now had become apparent to the young man that the sheriff's unwarranted hostility didn't portend him any good. "Sure, I'm that sheriff. My name's Masterson, and I was kidnapped, but the bloody scoundrels couldn't hold me. I got away and came here, but it looks as if I better had kept going."

Ignoring the young man's appeal, the sheriff beckoned to all to come close. "Look, fellers." He spoke loudly so every one in the room could hear. "We're in luck. Now that we knows it him, how about us claimin' that reward?"

"But, Hank," Clem interposed, "since you bein' a sheriff, seems 'tho 'tain't yore business to claim no reward, 'specully him bein' a fellow officer."

The sheriff grinned. "I'll fix that, Clem. One of you men can handle the matter. So, if Earp comes huntin' for his pet around here, I won't know nothin' about it. All in favor say 'aye'. Reckon the 'ayes' have it."

"You lowdown bunch of polecats," Masterson hurled at them. "So, that's your game? If Wyatt Earp should come here and find out about your dirty scheme, he sure would give you hell."

The sheriff's laugh turned suddenly into a menacing growl. "What the hell do I care about him? If he should come here, he'd wish to gawd he'd stayed back in Dodge City where he belongs. This here is my bailiwick, an' I aims to do here what I damn pleases, United States marshal or no United States marshal."

Hearing these words, Earp again arose, but quickly subsided when he heard the clattering sound made by galloping horses as they entered the outside square. They sounded as if there was a large number of them.

"Jest who in hell can they be," he

[*Turn To Page* 82]

**2 POWERFUL MYSTERY NOVELETS**

**Those photographs would kill Dawn Stevens' reputation if they got around now . . . but they killed more than that . . .**

*DARKNESS FOR DAWN STEVENS*
*by Edward D. Hoch*

**The first question was: why was an otherwise well-dressed man going around wearing two right shoes? Before I could figure that one out, he'd slugged me, and there I was with no shoes at all . . .**

*STRAW FEET*
*by James Vale Downie*

*plus many other topnotch stories and fact features*

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From France and Germany come amazing Scientific Reports of outstanding results obtained with Royal Jelly. One French Authority writes of women over 40 feeling increased sexual vitality and of a wonderful feeling of "youth and well-being" that resulted from continued use of Royal Jelly.

At this moment, in Leading Universities, Scientists and Nutritionists and Medical Doctors are doing extensive work to determine the exact role that Royal Jelly may play in Your Sex Life, Your Health and Your Emotional Condition. These researchers are especially interested in its effects on those who have passed middle age. They are working on Royal Jelly because this rare NATURAL FOOD has been indicated to contain remarkable Energy and Sex Factors.

Doctor Paul Niehans, famous Swiss Surgeon and experimenter with Hormones says: "ROYAL JELLY is an activator of the glands"...Dr. Niehans discovered that many minor disabilities which bother millions of people such as tiredness, irritability, headaches, insomnia, physical and spiritual convulsions, were easy to treat with the Cellular Therapeutics of the Secretion of the bees which we call Royal Jelly.

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Jenasol R. J. Formula 60, in the opinion of these reputable physicians removes any possible danger for the layman in the use of these powerful, concentrated nutritional extracts. This is the latest and possibly the greatest advance in the history of Medical Science. This combination, created under the strict supervision of a Registered, Licensed Pharmacist, and Medical Doctor, named "Jenasol R. J. Formula 60," makes the use of these amazing elements perfectly safe.

Every man and woman who feels "old" and "played out" before their time should seriously consider the use of "Jenasol R. J. Formula 60" to increase their pep and energy.

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### MEDICAL RESEARCH

We have listed below some of the extensive Medical and Laboratory research that has been done with Royal Jelly:

Many authorities still dispute the efficacy of Royal Jelly while others consider it a potential Boon to Mankind.

- *Dr. de Pomiade, 2nd International Congress of Biogenetics, Baden-Baden, Germany: April 5, 1956.
- Dr. Maurice Mathias, Pasteur Institute of Tunisia, October, 1952.
- Cowdry's Problem of Aging, Thomas S. Gardner. (Reprinted from Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 8, No. 3, July, 1953.)
- Analyses of Royal Jelly and Pollen, Nevin Weaver and Kenneth A. Kuiken (Technical Contribution, No. 1485 Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.)
- Longevity Factors in Royal Jelly, Thomas S. Gardner. (Reprinted from Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 3, No. 1, January, 1948.)

We make no claims for ROYAL JELLY. We have merely accumulated reports that have been made as a result of experimentation and research by Doctors, Scientists, and Nutritionists in many parts of the world.

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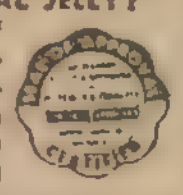

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heard the sheriff call out in a nervous voice. "Sounds like a troup of cavalry from the noise they's makin'. If that's Earp and his crew after this kid, he's got to fight for him. He's our meat an' we aims to keep him."

"'Tain't Earp, Hank," Bill called back. Then he exclaimed, "By gawd, if it ain't yore old friend, Bullneck Bones, an' he's done brung along his whole gang of cutthroats. They's linin' up on the fur side of the square."

A look of bitter disappointment crossed the sheriff's face. "Damn the luck," he growled, "so, it had to be him who done the snatchin'. An' once that land-pirate gets his paws on a person, he never lets loose. He's keen as a hungry houn dog on a trail. But I'm glad it ain't Earp; I can dicker with Bullneck."

Hardly had the clatter ceased when a heavy-sounding voice came billowing into the saloon from across the square. "Is Hank Waldo, the sheriff, in there? If he is, tell him his friend, Bullneck Bones, is here an' wants ter see him."

"Watch 'im close, men," the sheriff ordered. He represents good money." He then walked down the room to the front door and opened it.

"I'm trailin' a young buck on a black hoss," the bandit greeted him. "If you has him in there send him out."

"Ain't seen no such person, Bullneck," the sheriff replied.

"You're lyin', Hank," the bandit bellowed back. "He wuz seen headin' this way an' he rode a black hoss. There's the critter now, standin' right before your eyes. I jes gotta have thet bastid,

[Turn To Page 84]

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Hank. Last week him an his posse grabbed two of my men. Claimed they caught 'em rustlin' cattle. Yestidy they wuz hung. So, hustle 'im out before I starts shootin'."

"Wa'al, now, Bullneck," the sheriff replied, speaking softly, "let's don't act hastily. Me an' you are good friends, ar'nt we? Has been for a long time. So don't see no need for any shootin'. Yes, we've got the feller, an' we've jest been figerin' on holdin' him for the ransom."

"Ransom," echoed the outlaw, "Haven't heard about no ransom. How much?"

"Dodge City has offered a thousand dollars. If I gets it, how about splittin' fifty-fifty?"

FOR A LONG minute, the outlaw sat his horse thinking. The name, Bullneck Bones became him. He was a big beef of a man having a boney frame the size of a giant and a large cannon ball head perched on a short thick neck.

"As yuh said, Hank, me an' you has been gettin' along jes fine, an' I don't see no profit in disturbin' our friendship. But a thousand ain't enough if we has to divvy."

"How about two?"

"Two ain't enough either. Gimme the kid, then I'll have them Dodge City suckers where I wants 'em. If they don't come across with more

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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dough, I reckon Earp will. He's got some good gold mine interests, an' I reckon he won't stand by an' let the feller get strung up." Bullneck grinned. "The joke then, Hank, will be on him, 'cause I aims to fool 'im. When I gits all his money, I'll jest take ther kid out an' stretch 'im. Hank, I jes gotta do thet on account of them two men."

The sheriff smiled dubiously. "'Twon't be exactly what you'd call honable doin's, Bullneck; but bein's its a pussonal matter with you, I reckon it'll be all right with me. I'll send 'im out."

When the sheriff turned back into the room, young Masterson greeted him with blazing eyes, and his lips quivered with rage. "You might be a sheriff, but as a man you're worse than a coyote. A coyote is both sneaky and yellow, but he's a gentleman alongside of you. I apologize to him."

Knowing now what the bandit planned to do to him, Masterson scanned the hard, threatening faces staring at him; but seeing no sign of sympathy or help, and figuring that it was impossible now for Earp and the posse to rescue him, he decided to make a break. Hurling his body against the men in front of him, he knocked them to one side and ran to the front door. Outside he rushed over to his horse, snatched the reins and mounted; but before he could get going, Bullneck jumped his horse forward and came tearing toward him.

Quickly uncoiling his lariat, he sent it looping through the air to encircle Masterson's body. When the bandit brought his horse to a sudden stop, the rope tightened, jerking the young man out of his saddle and landing him heavily upon the ground. But before the outlaw could tighten the rope, Masterson, with a fierce jerk, widened the loop and shoved the rope up over his head. Jumping to his feet, he ran back

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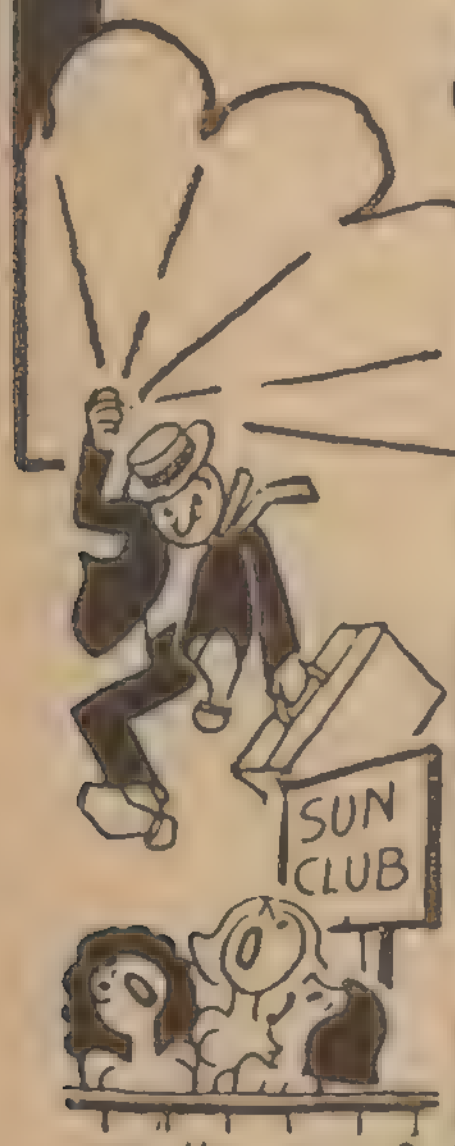


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into the saloon where many hands grabbed him.

Bullneck followed, riding his horse up close to the saloon. "Slippery as hell," he laughed. "Untied hisself early this mornin' right under our noses, then sneaked his hoss out an' got away."

The instant Bullneck came within Earp's vision, his countenance brightened. "Luck sure is with me," he murmured. "If he'll only stay there a few minutes, all hell is going to break loose in this place."

As Masterson entered the saloon, the sheriff, cursing loudly, ran up to him and poked the muzzle of his gun into his belly. "Git out there," he growled, "we ain't messin' with you much longer." Beckoning to his henchmen, he ordered, "Hustle 'im out, quick."

WITH A snarling cry of rage, Masterson broke his hands loose and knocked a man down, but he was overpowered instantly and shoved struggling toward the door. Suddenly his captors stopped short and, with all the others, turned and stared toward the back of the saloon. A clear, commanding voice had said, "All hands drop your guns and reach for the sky. You, too, sheriff."

"Wyatt Earp," they all gasped.

"Sure is," Earp smiled down on them mockingly. "The despicable United States marshal in person."

The instant of startled, sullen silence was broken by the clatter of many six-guns landing on the floor, and the sound of Bullneck Bone's grumbling voice outside growing increasingly louder and more demanding.

Having stepped out from behind the barrels, Earp was standing on the raised platform with his legs slightly bowed and his feet spread apart. In his right hand was his famous long dis-

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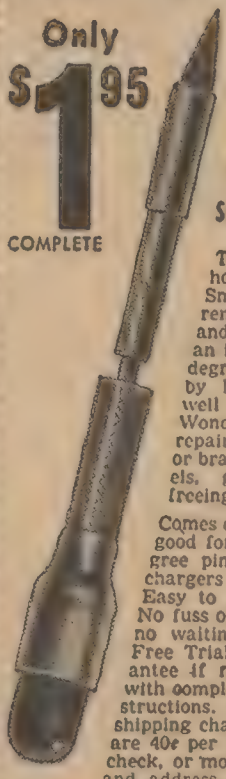

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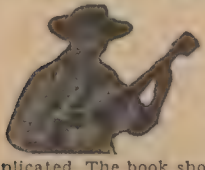

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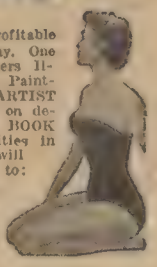

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tance shooting revolver with its blue-black barrel pointed at the crowd.

"Sorry, gents, to interrupt these interesting proceedings," he drawled facetiously, "but I figure that they have gone far enough."

Earp beckoned to Masterson to come to him. "Now, gents," he resumed, "having seen and heard all that has transpired here, my reaction is going to be not only quick, but deadly—and I mean deadly. I'm about to perform a public service, which is to rid this community of some murdering bandits—along with a crooked sheriff and a bunch of bad hombres who are in cahoots with him. And further more, the time and place to do this job is right here and right now."

Sneers and loud derisive laughter greeted Earp's remarks. "Listen to him," a man shouted. "Listen to the high and mighty United States marshal. Aims to get rid of us, does he? Him with only one gun against our twenty, not countin' them bandits besides."

"How you expect to perform this miracle, mister," another asked.

" 'Twont be much of a trick," Earp answered him smiling. " 'Bout as easy as falling off a log."

Another howl of derision greeted these remarks. "He's jes bluffin'. He ain't agoin' to let nothin' hurt his hide; he's too precious. Now he's got the kid, he's aimin' to cheat us out of those thousand dollars. Let's go git him."

Shouting and swearing, they stooped, grabbed their guns and rushed to the foot of the steps that led up to the platform. There they stopped when the gun in Earp's hand with a deafening roar, exploded. Instantly, it was followed by another explosion. The bullet from the first shot smashed a hole through one of the front windows of the saloon. Deflected by the glass, it

[*Turn To Page 92*]

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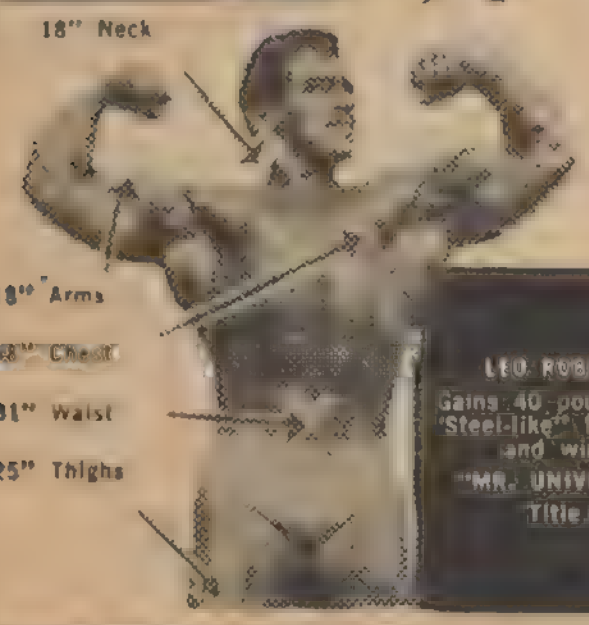

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**LEO ROBERT**
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**JULIAN DAME**
Before
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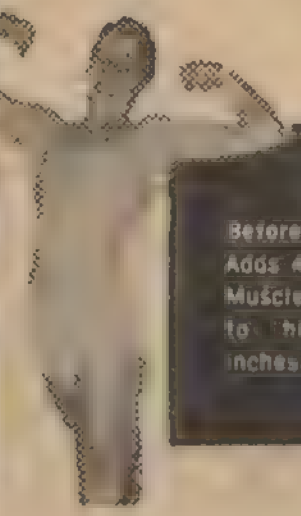

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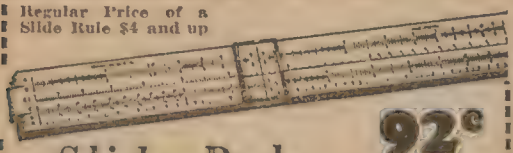

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missed its target, but the second bullet, passing through the hole made by the first bullet, and without touching the glass, landed in the center of Bullneck's Bones' breast, toppling him dead from his saddle.

With a wild cry of rage and surprise, Bullneck's cohorts opened fire with their rifles, sending bullet after bullet crashing into the saloon. Then leaping from their horses, they charged furiously across the square, shooting as they came.

Many of the men in the saloon, including the sheriff, were killed by the murderous fusillade. Those who escaped either fell flat upon the floor, or took cover behind chairs and tables. Quickly, they returned the fire and in a few seconds a pitch battle was raging.

In the midst of it, Earp yelled, "Come on, Mr. Masterson, let's go." Snatching the key from the door, he locked it from the outside. Then both ran over to Earp's horse, untied the reins, mounted and sent it galloping down the alley. Shortly, they came upon Masterson's horse wandering around the street.

Within a mile they met the posse. "Turn back, fellows, it was Bullneck Bones who kidnapped Mr. Masterson. I shot Bullneck and by now the rest of his gang should be dead."

One of the deputies spoke up. "Wyatt, now that you have rescued Willie, what about you claimin' that ransom money?"

Wyatt smiled. "As a fellow back there in that saloon said to the sheriff, when the sheriff was planning to claim the money, 'Since you're the sheriff,' seems 'tho 'taint yore business to claim no reward, 'specully, him bein' a fellow officer.' Well, men, that goes for me likewise."

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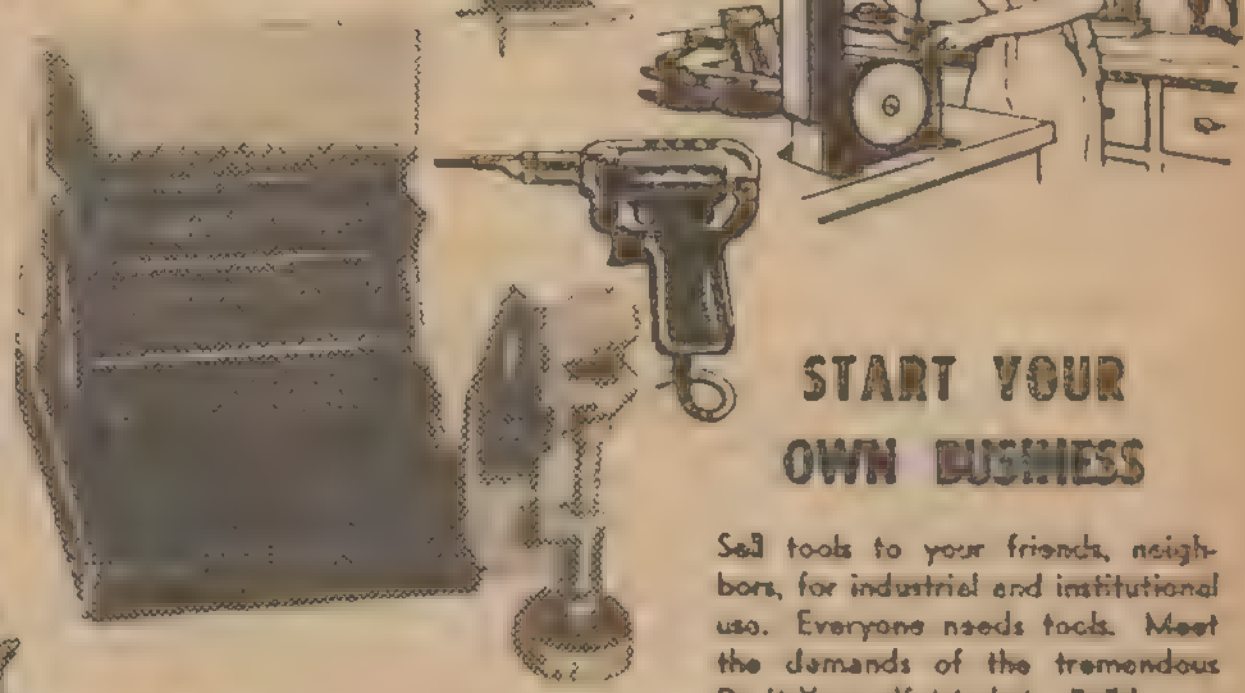

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## Organized Owlhoots

(*continued from page 7*)

visible. One of them was downed by return fire, but the other was seen to dash off into the darkness.

To the general dismay of the posse, they discovered soon enough that the man who'd gone down was not Duggan, but Hill, who'd been dragged into the thing as a comparatively innocent bystander. After a brief attempt to track Duggan through the thick brush in the dark, they gave up and decided at least to secure Franklin.

They found Musgrove's erstwhile aide asleep in the bed in his hotel room. But outlaws sleep, even while drunk, with one ear open. Franklin awoke fully alert, and gave three men a bad time for several minutes. After some leaping about, over the bed, and around the room, the desperado managed to get his hands on his gun. He had barely lifted it to take aim, when a bullet from Cook's gun got him through the heart.

There was still Duggan to find, and for a while it looked as if that was going to be the least of their troubles. When the three lawmen came down the hotel stairs, they found the town, aroused by the shots, in an uproar. Miles Hill's body demanded explanation. The Hill brothers were friends and neighbors to the people of Golden, and there were ugly looks for the invading posse, and murmurs of trouble.

It took a while to get people even to listen to the full story, but when, finally they managed to explain it, the crowd's anger turned from Cook to Duggan. Although it was almost ridiculous to hope to capture a man in the hills at night, search parties went out immediately, and hunted till dawn for the runaway.

[*Turn To Page 96*]

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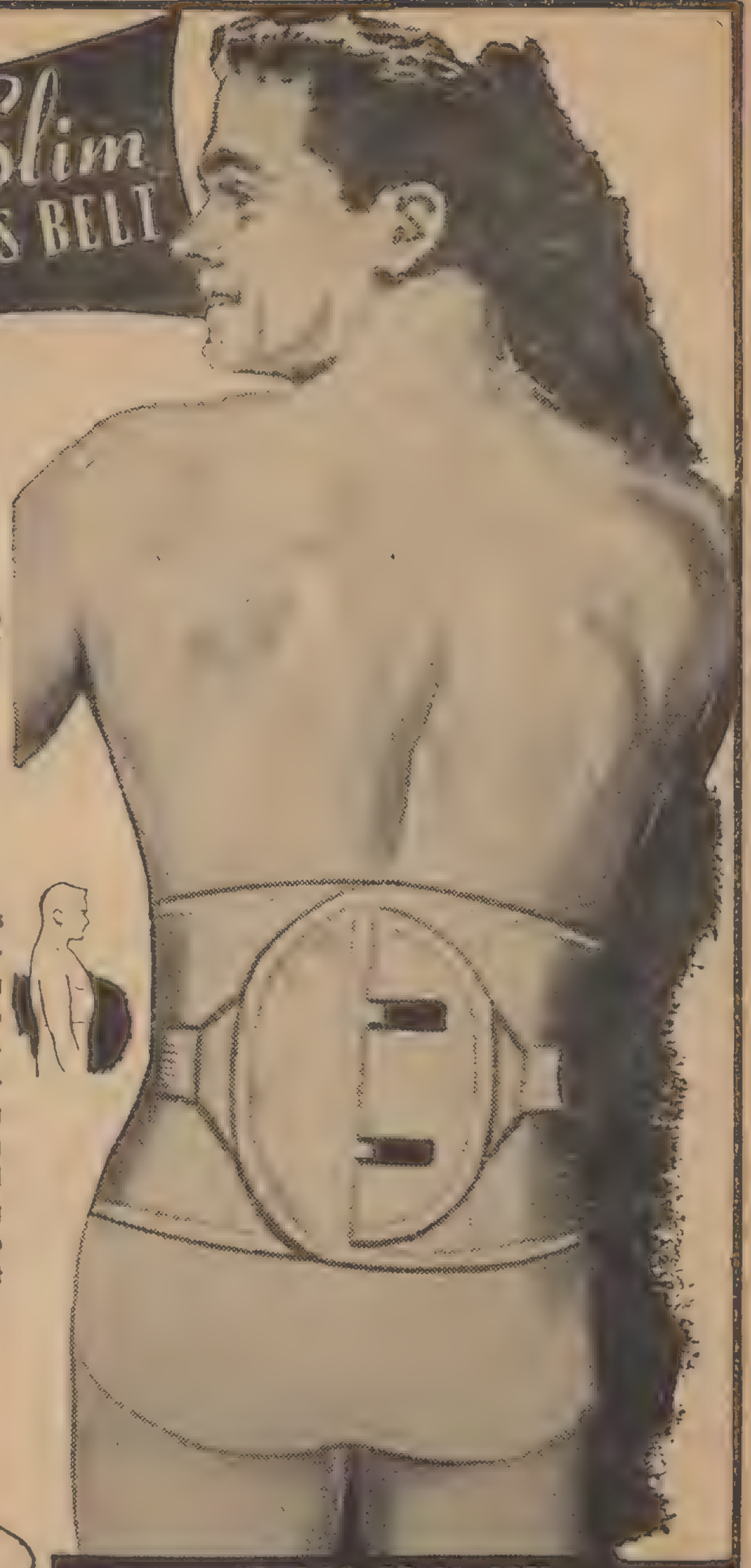

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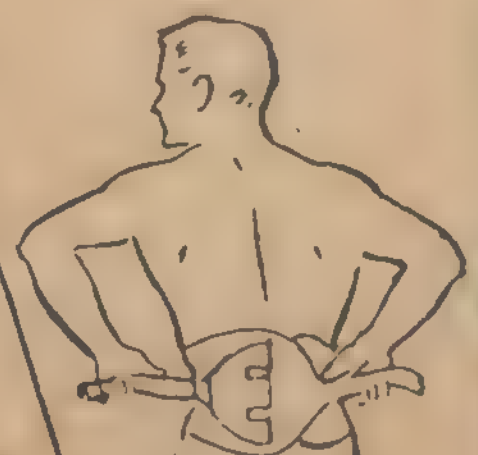

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By morning, the desire for vengeance was worn down some; and it became apparent to even the most heated that Duggan would never be found in the hills. Cook stayed just long enough to testify at the inquests, and got back to Denver to find more mob action, this time more successful.

THE HANGING of L. H. Musgrove is a unique chapter in lynching history. Both the crowd and the prisoner were so quiet, well-mannered, and upright about the whole thing, that it seemed more like a graduation ceremony than the final rites of a dyed-in-the-wool criminal.

The mob that gathered in front of the jail used no violence. They needed none. There were enough of them, and they were determined; and for that matter, the jailers probably felt much the same way. The prisoner was released without difficulty, and escorted by the town's leading citizens to a bridge over Cherry Creek, where the city's executions had taken place in pre-law days.

Probably the wierdest touch of all was that the crowd paused in front of the jail, to take a solemn vote on the matter of the hanging. After duly voting to dispose of their man, they marched him away.

Whether Musgrove hoped till the last minute for help from his friends (who by now, not unwisely, had left town), or whether he was simply resigned to his fate, nobody knows. He made no attempt at any time to get away. He stood quietly while the preparations were being made, wrote a couple of farewell letters—one to his wife and one to his brother—while they were tying his legs. He made no comment at any time, except when he was told to make his preparations for death. His answer then was an abrupt, "Go on with your work," to the hangman.

The condemned man smoked a cig-

aret calmly while the wagon on which he stood was being prepared for the final movement out from under, and while the noose was placed around his neck. As the whip descended on the the horse, the prioner flicked away his cigaret, and leaped high into the air.

When he came down again, the wagon was gone, and he succceeded in his purpose: His neck broke on the first sharp jerk, and he was saved the agony of death by strangulation.

The crowd dispersed; but strangely enough, it was in a more violent mood when it broke up than it had been when it gathered. The city stayed in a state of suspended lynch-mood, until, three days later, word was received that Duggan had been captured.

Cook was determined to bring in this last member of the band and save him for a fair trial. The people of Denver were otherwise determined. They were prepared for Duggan's arrival; but for the time being, at least, Cook managed to cheat them of their victim by persuading the stage coach to run ahead of schedule. He arrived with his prisoner a full twelve hours before the time expected, and managed to get Duggan into jail, although both men were recognized going through the streets. Such a large crowd was gathered by the time they made it to prison that Cook had to hold his guns on the mob in order to achieve his purpose.

Now that Duggan was safely incarcerated, the crowds swelled and ebbed in front of the jail all day. But with Cook back in town, the guards were a good deal more alert—or more courageous—than they had been when the mob came after Musgrove. By evening, every one had gone home, and Cook decided to move Duggan overnight, quietly, to another jail, in case things started up again the next day.

He made his plans secretly, and got Duggan safely into the wagon. Everything seemed to be all right...until they got to the bridge over Cherry Creek where Musgrove had flicked his last cigaret ash. Then the wagon was suddenly surrounded by a mob that had somehow got word of the plan. At that point, the terrified prisoner, displaying none of his leader's fortitude, was hustled over to a convenient cottonwood, and the last of the Musgrove band was finished.

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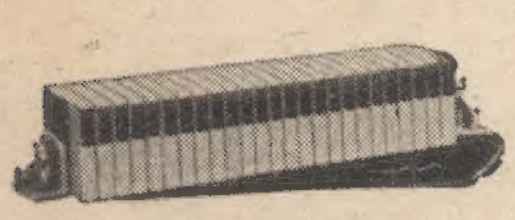

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